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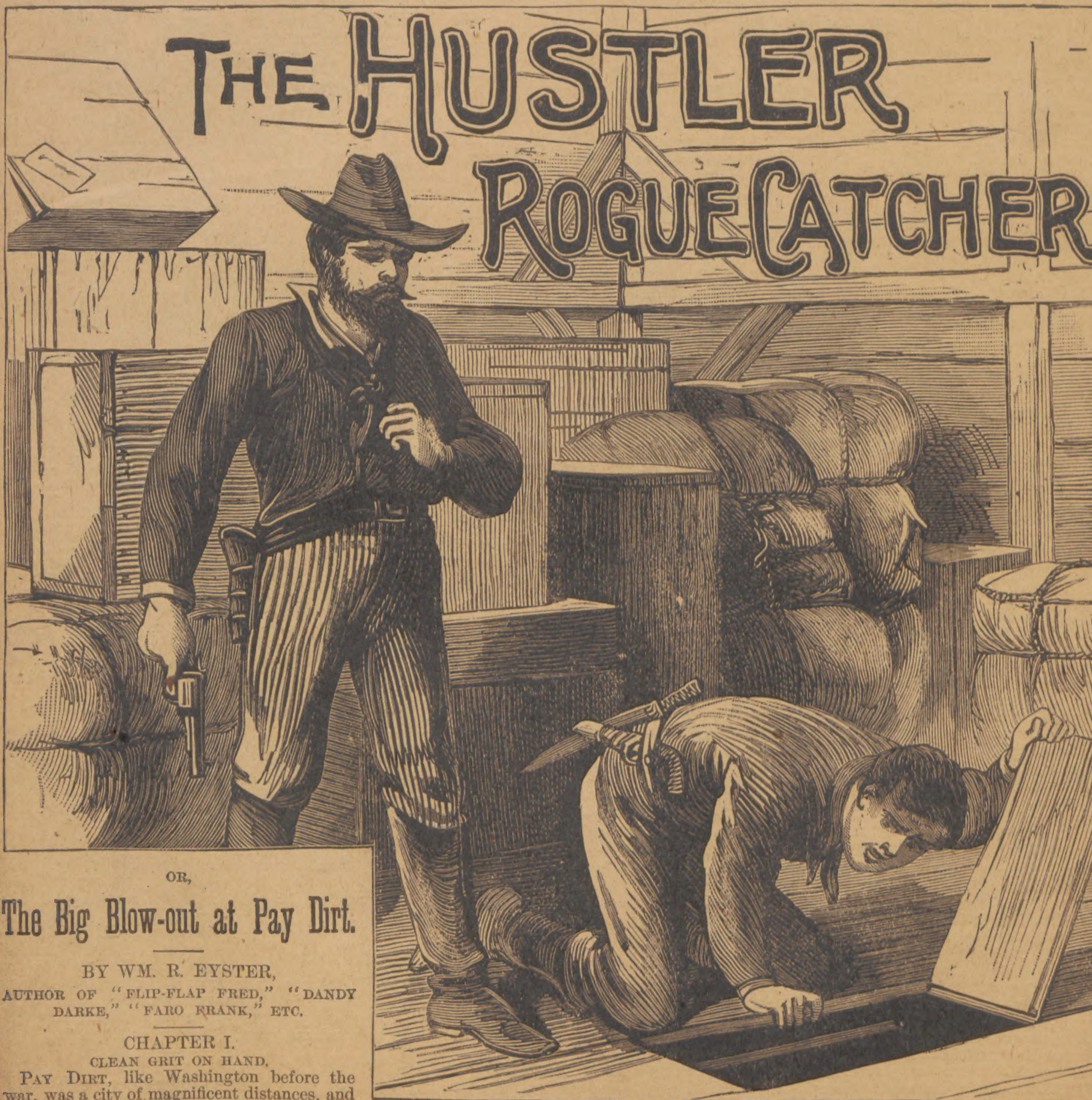
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OR,
The Big Blow-out at Pay Dirt.

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AUTHOR OF "FLIP-FLAP FRED," "DANDY
DARKE," "FARO FRANK," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

CLEAN GRIT ON HAND.

PAY DIRT, like Washington before the war, was a city of magnificent distances, and its outskirts were lonely and far removed from the business center of the place.

SAILOR SAM, GRIPPING HIS REVOLVER STOOD OVER CLEAN GRIT, READY FOR ANY EMERGENCY.

Helen Ford lived nominally in the town; but as far as neighbors were concerned might as well have lived three or four miles further up the gulch. There was not a cabin within a quarter of a mile of her.

For three days she had dwelt there alone—at such times as she was not trailing through the neighboring gulches, looking for traces she never found.

For three days Ezra Ford, her father, had been missing.

If the old man had been childless it is doubtful if there would have been much outcry over his loss. As he had a daughter, and that daughter's name was Helen, a dozen citizens had undertaken to find him, but, so far had failed to meet with a trace of the missing man.

Worn out in body and mind, Helen returned to the cabin a short time before sunset. She had never dared venture far away for fear some intelligence of the lost one would come during her absence.

She had forced herself to take a few mouthfuls of food, and had sunk down to rest, when the sound of a step outside brought her to her feet again.

She recognized the tread; and as the man who made it was coming alone it was not certain in her mind that she was glad to hear it, though Doctor Hanshaw was not an unpopular man with the people of Pay Dirt. At any other time she might have attempted to escape the interview.

But this man had promised to find her father, and it was possible he had kept his word. Anxiety was too much for her. As the step came nearer her own movements grew more rapid. When he halted at the door she was at the other side of the threshold.

"The worst, tell me the worst!" she exclaimed. "I knew you would not come until you had found him. Where is he?"

The doctor looked up gravely.

He was a handsome man, well-built, and above the medium height. In his black eyes there was a troubled look, and after they had once rested fairly on Helen's face he turned them hastily away, as though unwilling for her to read the story that might be written there.

Silence was worse than speech.

"I can bear it, whatever it may be, and silence is worse than cruelty. You have found him?"

"Yes, I have found him; or, at least, a man has who was employed by me."

"And you—what have you done with him? Why is he not here?"

"What have I done with him? Why should you ask such a question as that? If he has come to harm be sure it was through no fault of mine. For your sake I would have protected him with my life."

It was easy to see that something had happened to the missing man.

The doctor had turned his eyes again upon the girl-woman who gazed at him so earnestly.

There was reproach in his glance, as well as pity; and if the tones of his voice told anything it was that he spoke rather in sorrow than in anger.

"It is false! You have threatened him harm in the past, and now it has come. He feared you; and he blamed you more than I care to speak of. Tell me where his body is and I will go to it. You have killed him at last, as you said you would."

"My dear girl," he said, calmly, "you are wildly excited, or such a fancy would never enter your head. Ezra and I were friends, and more than friends, for years. No one regretted his downward course more than I did; and no one living has done more for him, unless, perhaps, yourself. That much you certainly will acknowledge?"

"No. I will not acknowledge anything of the kind. It was you who drove him to his death."

The doctor showed no signs of either anger or astonishment. Before Helen could guess what he was after he had reached out suddenly, though gracefully, and possessed himself of her hand.

"Listen! You are alone in the world. I know it, for I have often heard poor Ezra say it. Though he was so much the older he was always willing to lay bare to me, frankly and fully, things that from others he kept in the innermost recesses of his heart. He lamented the fact to me more than once, saying that if anything should happen to him he knew not what would become of you. It was only when he knew what I have never yet dared to repeat to you, that he seemed to feel easier. He had trusted somewhat, of course, to my friendship for his daughter. When he knew that I had a still stronger feeling it brightened the future, and made his last days happy."

Quite a little speech did the doctor make, emboldened by the fact that Helen had not attempted to draw away her hand, and listened quietly.

But now she wrenched herself loose, flinging away his fingers as though there was contamination in their touch.

To her full height she drew herself, and spoke with a scorn that was next thing to fury.

"It is false, from beginning to end! You were no friend of his, though he submitted to your presence because he feared you. He admitted as much, carefully as he tried to guard the fact at the first. He always, after that, claimed you would some day do him great harm—and at last his fears have been realized. Doctor Hanshaw, what have you done with my father?"

There never was a man more surprised.

Helen Ford had seemed to Hanshaw in the past to be a girl more apt to cling than to curse. She had treated him with a polite respect which he had thought was due to his superior position. Under the intelligence he brought he had expected to see her wilt before him. Really, he had expected to have quite a task, consoling sufficiently to have her in condition to listen understandingly to what else he had to say.

The last thing he expected was to find her suspicious of him. He had believed Ezra Ford entirely too firmly under his thumb to dare breathe a word in regard to the relations between them.

Nevertheless, the doctor showed none of his surprise in either voice or face.

"Foolish girl! Even under the excitement over what has happened there can be no excuse for words like those you have just uttered. Let your own good sense tell you. In all Pay Dirt what other friend had Ezra Ford? What other foot but mine has stepped across his threshold with the tread of a friend? And who else will care for you now if you throw away the offer I have to make you? Be reasonable. Of whom else in this town can you accept aid?"

"Of any other rather than from you. Whatever you may appear to others do not forget that I know you as you are! I have endured your presence here in the past for the sake of my father. If it be true he is dead you have no hold or power over my life, and henceforth we two will be strangers at the best, foes open and deadly if need be."

Something of the mask dropped from the doctor's features.

If Helen Ford had not been so worked up by sorrow, uncertainty, and anger, she might have quailed before the glance shot at her.

Instead, she felt a wild sort of satisfaction in saying what policy or prudence had kept back for some time.

"You are frank at last," Hanshaw breathed through his now white lips. "Now, listen to me. It suits me that some day soon you shall be my wife. In Pay Dirt I am a

greater power, even, than you suppose. I would rather have a willing than unwilling bride; but, whether you yield or struggle the end will be the same. Mine you must and shall be—and the time will not be long delayed. Will you submit to the inevitable, or must I crush?"

"Crush! It lies beyond your power to do that. You may kill, but while life remains my answer will be the same. *Begone!* Whether Ezra Ford is living or dead I have nothing more to do with you, and if he comes back it shall be to fight you. If the mystery of his disappearance remains unexplained I shall try my best to bring it home to you. There may be a rope in reserve for even Cyrus Hanshaw."

"Then we need wait no longer!" and the doctor, with a deft movement, caught her hand with one of his, while he attempted to throw his other arm around her waist.

Then—the hold was suddenly broken, and the doctor staggered back, a sound between a grunt and a groan escaping from his lips, while between the two slipped a form that was large for a boy, yet scarcely large enough to be that of a man.

"That was my head that went into yer breadbasket, old man, and if you don't sing mighty low there will be something else there that won't be half as easy to digest. Hands out, and fingers empty! It's Little Clean Grit that's talking to you, and he's a hustler from 'wayback."

There was no mistaking the boyishness of the tones.

A boy it was, but he handled the weapons of a man with a readiness which showed he was wise beyond his years.

As the doctor recovered his balance his hand moved mechanically for his revolver, and had it not been for the stern warning that lay in the words he but indistinctly heard there might have been red work, then and there.

Looking up he saw that he was covered by the muzzle of a revolver, and the deadly tube never wavered as it pointed straight at his head. If that uplifted hammer came down there could follow nothing but a fatal result.

"Level head, even when you get your mad up," laughed the boy, as he marked the hesitation.

"I know I oughtn't have done it; but I heard a few of your remarks, and couldn't help. I chipped, of course. And the chip is going to stay right hyer for the present. Move along home, or elsewhere. If you stay around three minutes longer by the watch you won't go till you're kerried."

The doctor was not too angry to understand the determination underlying the mocking tones, and it was not his desire to do anything which might call too much attention to his presence at the spot.

"I'll save you the trouble of committing murder, young man, but before you are much older I think I can guarantee you will find out your mistake. I leave you with your champion, Miss Ford. Do not forget what I have been saying, and be ready with your answer when we meet again. Good-night!"

To the surprise of the two, Hanshaw turned and strode away without delay.

"He's a bad man, and you can spell it with a big B," remarked the boy—Clean Grit as he called himself.

"I would just as soon he had kicked a little harder before he left. He will have it in for both of us, and we will be apt to be hearing sounds from his direction, before long. Let 'em come, though; and, if, as I guess you do, you need a friend, say the word, miss, and I'm your antelope."

CHAPTER II.

A MYSTERY OF PAY DIRT.

"THANK you a thousand times for your aid when I seemed to need it most. I assure

you he will not take me off my guard again. But I am afraid you have made a dangerous enemy for one so young."

In spite of her own bereavement and troubles, Helen could think of her youthful protector's welfare.

"That's his misfortune, and my good luck. I'd sooner have him for an enemy than friend, any day in the year," answered the boy with a shrug of his shoulders.

"I don't often go wrong when I say a man is a rascal, and I just lay it down he's a rogue of the biggest kind. Mebbe I'll prove it before I get done with him. Got a gun?"

The abrupt question surprised the girl, but she answered promptly:

"Yes, and one I can rely on when I use it, as I know how."

"Then, keep it in reach. If I read anything I saw in his face he's coming back at you. Went off all too sudden for a man of his stripe unless he meant to jump Jim Crow afore he was many hours older. What's his lay-out in Pay Dirt?"

"You are a stranger here, then? I thought so, or I would have seen you before this."

"You bet I'm a stranger, or I wouldn't be asking names and dates on a bad-looking man. Just struck the camp, and I haven't hit it very hard, for this is far as I've got."

"I thought so or you could not help but recognize a man as well known as Doctor Hanshaw. He is a doctor by profession, and a fairly good one I will admit. He has some mining interests, too; and I have heard it whispered that he owned a share in the Early Bird Saloon."

"Has a shy at everything in the ring, eh? Looks as though he knew the value of an ace full as well as the next man. You look out for him, anyway; and if you need a friend, just shout for Little Clean Grit, and you'll find me around. Perhaps I could be helping you now. What's the difficulty?"

The boy could see there was something more troubling his newly-made acquaintance than the insult of Doctor Hanshaw.

His question brought the tears into her eyes, though she did not lose control of her feelings.

"My father! For three days he has been missing. There has been no trace or trail to follow, and I have been fearing the worst. That man came to say he had been found—and from his words it must be he is dead. And he has gone away without telling me where to look for the body."

"The whelp! If I had known in time he would have had to do a little explaining before he got off. Take it as easy as you can. Like as not he was lyin'. If he wasn't I'll have the truth out of him before he is many minutes older. So long! I'm off, right now!"

With hasty but silent strides he moved away, taking the same course as that lately followed by the doctor.

Helen looked after him almost hopefully.

The boy who had so opportunely made his appearance would have been something of a puzzle had she been in a frame of mind to pay closer attention to him.

Now and then he showed a roughness of speech bred of association with the men of the mine; but for the most part his language was more correct than she had been accustomed to hear from the class of people to which he appeared to belong, and showed that he had possessed advantages for education earlier in life.

Who he was really, and what he was after, were questions she had not asked; but from the one sample she had had she did not doubt he was able to take care of himself under most circumstances. If he was, as his dress and manner seemed to indicate, a cowboy from the ranges, he had been learning in a good school.

The youngster was not troubling himself about the impression he had made, nor did

he allow himself to think much about the young lady he had just left. He was on the trail of a man who would be apt to keep his eyes open; and Clean Grit did the same.

He was afraid he had lost some valuable time, though he knew he could not have settled down to his work understandingly had he not waited for the information the girl-woman had given him.

"Wonder where pard Mike has got to?" he thought to himself, as he stole swiftly along.

"If he stayed long enough to see the fun it's just possible he's on the trail himself. Move-along has a trick of doing the right thing in the right place without anybody telling him to do it. If he's skipped on to the town we may miss a point—for something tells me the doctor has a game on foot for right now."

Hanshaw had already vanished when Clean Grit left the Ford cabin, and unless he took the straight route to the business portion of the camp it was not likely the boy would be able very soon to overhaul him.

Carefully as he searched the shadows which had begun to fall, nothing was to be seen of him, and the young hustler deemed it best not to waste time making casts from this side to that. With a hope it would all come right he followed the main trail, gliding on with a fleet, noiseless step, which soon brought him in sight of the cluster of shanties at the end of the main street of Pay Dirt.

So far he had not found a trace of either Hanshaw, or his own pard, Move-along Mike.

As he passed the shanties, however, he saw a little further down the street a knot of men in front of the Alhambra Saloon, and it was evident at a glance there was something of public interest being discussed there.

"Oh, thar's no doubt he'd bin thar," a man was saying, as Clean Grit came within hearing distance of the spot; "but he's not thar now, an' he warn't thar when we arrived. We could see Jimmy's tracks, an' ther old coat war lyin' thar, jest ez it hed bin doubled up ter putt onder his head, an' some smutchs ov blood on it ter boot; but old Ezry warn't thar, an' thar war nothin' ter show how he got away."

"P'rhaps Jimmy hed toted him a bit ov ther way, an' then furgot whar he sot him down?" suggested one of the listeners.

"Nary time! We could see his tracks ez he come out ov ther kenyon, an' thar warn't no heft on his back. An' thar war no sign ov him a-lyin' along ther route. Oh, I tell yer, it are a mighty mysterious thing, fur accordin' ter Jimmy, he must 'a' bin all broke up, an' barely alive, when he found him."

"Not er bit ov doubt ef he went over ther wall ov the kenyon, ez Jim sez. Ther wonder are thet he war a-breathin'. An' ther rest ov ther boys are a-lookin' fur ther corpus?"

"That's what. An' I come back ter git more help, an' a leetle light on ther subject. Unless a grizzly kerried him off, er some other men come acrost him afore we got thar, he can't be fur away; an' livin' er dead, we're bound ter hev him."

"You kin git help, dead loads ov it. I'd go myself, but I reckon it mou't be ez well ter go an' tell ther gal how ther land lays now. She may be looking fur ther corpus by this time ef Doc tole her ther latest when he went out."

The conversation explained itself to the sharp ears of Clean Grit, beyond any need of questioning.

Here was the story—and more—which Doctor Hanshaw had been trying to tell to Helen Ford. If he could find nothing of his enemy, he might learn something of advantage, nevertheless.

The lad was going to worm himself further into the knot of men, and perhaps ask some questions, when he saw the doctor himself, coming hastily toward the spot. Looking a little further, he saw a ragged-looking youth skulking up.

In the latter individual Clean Grit recognized Move-along Mike.

"Just as I thought. He's hit the racket the first clatter! If there is anything to know about Mister Hanshaw, bet you Mike is on to it with a big O. Better see him first, and ask questions afterwards."

There was a good deal of difference in the appearance of the two boy pards.

The one was clean and natty in his dress, and his every movement was full of grace.

The other was perhaps as well dressed, though after a different style; but he had a slouchy step, and a sort of hang-dog appearance, which at first glance hardly told in his favor. He would scarcely have made the same good impression on Helen Ford that Clean Grit had done, even if he had come as promptly to her assistance.

The boy hustler knew his pardner well, however, and it was not through shame of his appearance that he approached him carelessly, and with the air of a total stranger.

Though it might not be possible to keep it up for long, yet it was as well to act for the present as though there was nothing between the two. No doubt the doctor had a quick eye, and if he once saw them together would understand they were friends.

The wink he gave Mike in passing was warning enough that Clean Grit did not wish to be recognized, and both of the boys moved on without a sign of hesitation.

Nevertheless, within the next five minutes they were together, and so well had they guarded their actions that not a soul had noticed the young strangers, meeting in an out-of-the-way place.

"You got on to him, did you?" was the salutation of the young hustler.

"Bet yer sweet life I did. An' a heap sight of work he's done in a mighty short time. You want it all straight from ther rattles?"

"Out with it. There's a contract in sight, and Doc Hanshaw's name appears in it in the largest kind of type."

Then Move-along Mike told his story, though it is not necessary to more than give the substance of what he said.

The two had been halted on their way to Pay Dirt by the sound of voices pitched in no friendly key. When Clean Grit darted in to the rescue his companion had crouched low, and waited for what might follow. He witness the discomfiture of the doctor, and when the latter turned away it was with a tireless and an adroit follower on his trail.

It was evident that Hanshaw had an appointment in the retired though near-by spot where he halted.

A man was there, waiting for him, who said a few words which Mike did not catch, but the answer was a growled, "Not this time, Ned."

Then, briefly the doctor gave his own version of what had happened. From what he said it was evident he had intended to induce Helen to follow him in search of her father.

While they were speaking Mike managed to creep closer, and was catching more and more of the conversation, when there was an interruption.

A third man came running up.

"Blame me, ef ther old codger ain't give us the slip! Ther dickens are to pay, an' no mistake! We left ther boys lookin' fur him, an' ran back ter tell ther news."

An angry curse from the doctor, and then the question:

"He was neither dead nor dying, then?"

"So it 'pears. An' ther wu'st ov it are thet he left no trail ter tell how an' whar he

went to. Are it goin' ter make ary difference?"

"If you mean, the other business, not a bit of it. It will be all the better. Half of Pay Dirt would have been out to help carry in the remains, and sympathize with the afflicted. Perhaps if the thing was worked right the whole of the town might be out searching for the body."

"Let Johnny alone fur that. He's kerried ther news ter Pay Dirt, an' ef he don't work 'em up fur all it's wuth I'd like ter know ther reason why."

"Just so none of our boys go along with the outfit. The little game with our man must be got in, now, though it will hurt nothing if it comes off a shade later in the evening than we had counted on."

"Got ter take him ez we ketch him, an' I'll bet our gang will be on hand ez ordered. Jest so they don't hit too hard."

"Never fear about that. They understand the game. Now, we had better get into camp, and see that everything is going straight. With big money in sight it won't do to miss a point in the deal."

So far Mike had got in his history, and he had but little more to tell, so that he completed it by a wave of the hand and lapsed into sudden silence as they heard steps coming in their direction.

"Stow it, I'm o-p-h," he muttered as the steps sounded still closer, and then he wheeled about, with a sudden change of mind, as he heard:

"Back, ye bloody pirates! Would ye tackle a peaceable merchantman, under the American flag?"

CHAPTER III.

DOWN IN THE CANYON.

If Clean Grit had only known it he had been very near learning more about the missing Ezra Ford than the people of Pay Dirt were apt to find out for some little time to come.

That very afternoon the two pards had been within an ace of getting a sight of Ezra; and if they had done so there would have been quite a different story to tell.

The boys had thrown themselves down by the side of the trail, some miles out from the town, and were discussing the chances for adventure in the place they were about to visit for the time. And all the while there was an adventure to be found almost at their hands.

In the first place a young man came plodding along the trail, who halted when he was a rod or so distant, and gave the lads a scrutinizing look.

"Hello, pard!" exclaimed Mike, not altogether satisfied.

"Hope you'll know us when you get your gig-lamps onto us again. This hyer ain't just a free-for-all sort of a thing, and it ain't ther pure quill fur you ter try ter crawl in onder the canvas. Pay yer quarter, er pass on."

Move-along Mike spoke up freshly enough; but the young man did not seem at all ruffled.

On the contrary, he smiled rather a pleasant smile.

"Don't be alarmed. I have no idea of intruding. I am a traveler, as I suppose you are yourselves. At first I thought perhaps you might know more about the trail to Pay Dirt than I; but I suspect I may as well save my questions."

"Guess you hit it that clatter," answered Move-along, in a milder tone.

There was nothing about the stranger which showed he meant to be either insulting or over-curious.

"We'll get there, of course, but ef you don't know more about ther road than we do you're a lost gosling, sure. As you seem to be in ther profesh you kin squattey-vous, an'

make yourself at home. I'll take back what I said a bit ago."

The stranger shook his head.

"Much obliged for the invitation, but I have had my rest, while you seem to have only just begun yours. It would be a waste of time, and no good done. If you are strangers in the town you can hardly tell me whether I can find a man named Ezra Ford there."

"Nixey. Is he a man ov fambly?"

There was a dry twinkle in the eye of the boy as he spoke which told he meant more than he said, and the stranger evidently understood him.

"You are sharp at guessing. When you get there you can inquire from the neighbors, and perhaps find out. I'll never tell."

And without waiting for the chaff which might have followed, he went on with a light, springy step. From the looks of his clothing he had come quite a distance, but he gave no sign of being fatigued, and at the rate he was going when he passed out of sight the boys thought it would not take him long to reach Pay Dirt, since the trail was apparently too plain for him to miss it.

Harker Hazen had some such idea himself.

He was a young man of perhaps twenty-four, with a frank, fearless sort of a face, and the air of one who was not exactly a tenderfoot, though he did not look like a sport or a mining man. Clean Grit had been quietly trying to size him up, and had not been able to come to any definite conclusion, save that the stranger knew something of the world, and would never fail to hoe his own row through lack of courage.

He made no great mistake in thinking so, either.

Hark Hazen had undertaken a trip on foot and alone which many a man would have shrunk from, and though he knew something of the dangers of the road he had no fear for them.

For some time after leaving the boys he strode on, looking from this side to that, taking in whatever beauty there was in the scenery, as well as locating in his mind every twist and turn of the trail. He was not specially interested in it, since he did not expect to follow it again, but it was a way he had.

He had a quick eye for moving objects, moreover.

He caught sight of a couple men coming toward him before they were aware of his presence, and his hands dropped into his side pockets as promptly as though he was a man with a record. They were not altogether pleasant looking fellows to meet in a lonely spot; though he knew men should not always be judged by their looks in these regions.

As they came along they were discussing something which they evidently did not care that the rest of the world should hear about. In their earnestness they spoke in so loud a tone that he caught a few of the words which seemed to bode no good to some one; and when they became aware of his presence they ceased their conversation so suddenly that it certainly had a suspicious look, to say nothing of a certain air of detected guilt that Hazen thought he observed in the glare they cast his way.

That might all be supposition which was wide of the truth. He nodded nonchalantly and was passing on, when one of the men stopped him.

"Say, stranger, did yer see ary ov ther boyees up ther trail, an' ef yer did hed they found ary sign?"

"I saw some boys, but they were hardly the ones you are speaking of. Like myself, they were strangers in Pay Dirt."

"All right. Pass on. Didn't know but what you hed some news."

"Any thing exciting expected to come

off? I'm a stranger, as I have said, but if there is a fresh strike, and a chance for me to get a pick in, I don't mind holding down a claim till I see how it pans out."

"Nary strike. It's jest a missin' man, ez half ther town are a-lockin' fur, which his name are Ezry Ford. They kinder s'pishun he's fell over ther rocks somwhar, while he war perspectin', and Doc Hanshaw'll pay big money ter ther man ez 'll find him. It's coin we mostly travel fur, an' so we're takin' a hand in. Maybe you'd like ter go 'long an' help us try ter make ther ripple?"

At the mention of the name of Ford, Hazen started a little, which was not observed; and then listened somewhat eagerly, which was.

A dusty pedestrian, who brightened up at the magic name of coin, might well be suspected of having a desire to come in on the ground floor.

Fortunately, Harker Hazen was no fool.

He smoothed the expression out of his face, and shook his head with a laugh.

"Much obliged, pards, but guess it would hardly pay. I don't know anything about your rocks, and I might tumble over myself, to say nothing of the chances that, with half the town hunting him, I would be only coming in at the tail end of the procession."

"So long, then. Reckon we better be goin'."

The two fellows plodded on, while Hazen moved off, seemingly only bent on reaching the town.

But he did not go far in that direction.

He had not forgotten his first suspicions, and the moment the bend in the trail screened him he turned aside, darted into the mesquite bushes, and began to make his way cautiously back.

"Perhaps they are on the square," he muttered.

"They may be going to do their best if there is a reward offered; but from the little I have heard of that same Doctor Hanshaw, he would be more apt to offer a premium for Ezra Ford dead than alive. And these fellows look as though they would be perfectly willing to bring him in any way which would be the least trouble. It will not hurt to watch them. They may lead me to him, or they may not, but I would prefer they did not know I was in the bushes till I had a chance to see their intentions developed."

The roughs had made very good use of the time.

They were already almost out of sight, and it was by accident he caught sight of them at all as his eyes turned away from the trail up which he had been gazing.

They had swung from the road almost immediately after leaving him, and were now hurrying along a gloomy gorge which led away into the mountains.

They seemed to know where they were going, for though they now and then gave a cautious glance to the rear they looked neither to the right hand nor the left, though there were nooks and recesses below the overhanging cliffs which well might conceal a fallen prospector.

The further they went the more they looked like a brace of conspirators, and the greater became their caution. It began to be a hard matter for Harker Hazen to keep them in sight without himself being seen.

Finally, they managed to disappear.

He thought that when he came to the spot where he last had sight of them he would be able at least to pick up their trail; but the hard ground there showed no trace of footprints, and there were several lines of retreat which they might have followed.

He hardly knew which of these to take. One was as likely a draw as another, and to explore them all would take time, to say nothing of the risk he ran of being lost for the night himself.

He allowed chance to decide, and chance sent him to the left.

Before long he felt assured he was on the right road, but in the end received a double surprise.

The route led him not into, but above, a narrow canyon, to reach the bottom of which from his position seemed almost impossible. On the other side of the bottom of the gulch he saw the two men for whom he was looking. They carried something between them which appeared to be the body of a third man—at first, he thought it was a corpse.

When they laid it down, though the distance was so great, Hazen thought he could discern a feeble movement.

The men turned away, stepped backward, and looked upward, pointing as they did so at the canyon wall above them. It looked as though they were trying to locate the route by which it would have been possible for the man to have fallen.

"Can it be," thought Hazen, "that they have Ezra Ford down there? Whoever it is, they are not altogether good Samaritans. They look more like the thieves. I wonder if I could reach them?"

Crouching low he drew out a revolver which had been swinging at his hip and took careful aim.

The distance was too great for close shooting; and as yet he was not absolutely sure. When he saw them bend down over the victim and attempt to force something in his mouth Hazen was more certain, but the time for shooting had gone by, and for the moment he was too excited to give the shout which might have driven them from their prey.

Had they succeeded?

He could not tell, though they seemed to think so. They stepped back a pace, looked down at Ford, whose struggles were scarcely perceptible, and then hurried away. At the same time Hazen, revolver in hand, went sliding down into the canyon.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CRY AT THE CABIN.

HARKER HAZEN had reasoned that if the two men had been able to make the descent of the canyon wall unharmed he could do the same if he could only find the proper track.

And as he had struck the gash at about the same place they had done he did not know why he should not find it.

Fortunately, perhaps, when the time to act came he did not waste any spare seconds hunting around for the path, but in strong excitement plunged straight forward. He was not sure the villains had gone yet, but about that he did not care. It would be relief to meet them.

If they opened an attack upon him at sight it would show his suspicions had not been unfounded.

But the men had reasons of their own for not wanting to be in sight of the spot, for a short time at least. They were no more hardened than many other ruffians who are willing to commit murder, but have an abhorrence for seeing their victim's death-struggles. They know by awful experience that it is something to haunt them.

And so sliding, stumbling, leaping from rocky point to dangerous ledge, with more than one fall, Hazen won his way down, and darted across the canyon to the side of the now motionless man.

Gazing downward, Hark looked anxiously into the white face before him. His eyes had never fallen on those features before, but he was questioning himself whether they resembled those of a photograph which, once upon a time, he had seen.

"It is Ezra Ford, sure enough; and he is dead beyond remedy. Poor Helen! There are some grains of white powder on his beard, and more of it scattered on the ground. Careless, even in their guilt! They must have poisoned him."

Then it seemed to him he detected a faint and transient fluttering in one of the eyelids, and the thought that the man might still be living made his heart stand still.

He bent over and touched the wrist that was nearest. There was warmth there, and a motion of the pulse which showed life, even if the current was moving sluggishly. With rare presence of mind he brushed away the powder from the lips of the motionless man, and forcing his mouth open, wiped it out, in the hope that if the drug had not been swallowed it would be possible to remove at least some of it in that way.

Then, he brought out a pocket flask, the contents of which had been as yet untouched, and forced the mouth of it between the yielding lips.

After that he chafed wrists, neck, and temples, and waited. There was more color in the whitened cheeks, and the signs of returning life grew stronger as the seconds went by.

A gasp and a feeble sigh gave Hazen more hope than he had previously had. He tried the flask again, and Ezra Ford opened his eyes.

"There, there, my friend! Take it easy. You are safe enough for the future, and believe me that I am more than your friend," said the young man in a low tone, as he observed a movement of repulsion.

"You have never met me before, but Helen has. I am Harker Hazen, of whom perhaps you have heard her speak."

"Hark Hazen! I cannot believe it."

That showed his mind was unimpaired, however weak the body might be. It was natural enough he should not believe this was a man whom he was certain was a couple thousand miles away.

"Ah, but it is, and it was the luck of a lifetime which brought me here. Say no more about that, now since you know you can trust me. Are you badly hurt? What shall I do?"

There were no symptoms of poisoning here, and Hark began to believe there was a fighting chance for Ezra Ford, after all.

"Perhaps I am not so badly hurt as those men think; but weak I am if they find me here and alive when they return they will kill me without mercy. Help me to get away. After that I can explain it all."

Hazen looked down upon the man almost helplessly.

He knew next to nothing of where he was, but felt that Pay Dirt was a long way off. If it had been to carry Ezra a few hundred yards he would have cheerfully undertaken the task, but this was a question of miles. How could he get away without leaving a trail behind for the ruffians to follow when they returned? He might stay there until that time and fight it out with them, but what then would become of the man? Altogether, the prospect was a gloomy one.

"Oh, they have tried to kill me, and thought they had succeeded, but I am alive, and with your help will baffle them yet. They must not know which way I have gone; they must never dream we will come on them to confound them. When they flung me over they broke no bones if they did rack me so I could not move. Can you climb?"

"As well as the next," answered Hazen, looking upward to see if he could find the route at which the wounded man was hinting.

"Yonder is a rope I had with me. It is lucky they did not see me use it. Near it you will find a place where you can climb the wall of the canyon, for perhaps twenty feet. Fasten one end of the rope about me and go up as far as you can. Then, look to the right and you will find a place where it is possible to go down till you reach the ledge you can see just above our heads. Draw me up there, if it kills me. Then, I will show you the path to a hiding-place I think they can never find. In a day or two

I will be strong enough to move, but they must not know. They would kill me yet before I could reach home. You can leave me there, and find Helen. Tell her the truth, and when I come back there will be no more danger, and no more yielding. Go quick! I am getting weaker."

It was true his voice was growing fainter from the exertions he had made to explain the position to the young man, and Hazen very much doubted the propriety of obeying his orders, yet he did not hesitate.

He found the cord spoken of, which was long and stout, though by no means heavy, and he made his way along the path as directed. It was not the thing he would have chosen to do if left to himself, but Ezra Ford seemed in deep earnest, and he yielded to his wishes.

Once on the ledge, and in obedience to Ford's directions, he took up the injured man and staggered along, reaching at length a place where he could again ascend for a little. In the end, he reached a niche in the rocks which could almost be called a cave, and at the further end of this he deposited his burden.

Ezra was not insensible, but his eyes were closed, his face whiter than ever, as he lay again without motion, save for the faint movement as he drew in the air with short, quick gasps. He might be about to die—he might only be gathering strength.

Hazen bent over him when he had drawn a long breath or two himself, and would have tried to do something for him, but a feeble motion of the half-raised hand told him to desist. In some trepidation he waited.

Weak as he was, Ezra had no intention of dying, and his principal fear seemed to be that the men would return and complete their work before he had gathered the strength to resist them.

In half an hour he was a very much better man; in an hour he was again strong enough to talk, though he did not seem to care much to waste breath explaining the position, which probably he thought ought to speak for itself.

Hark Hazen, when there was nothing he could do there, would have gone out to keep watch for what might be transpiring in the canyon, but Ezra would not allow it.

There was too much risk of his being seen, and a glimpse of the crown of his head would be enough to set the murderers on the trail.

"Stay with me an hour or so yet, and then I can give you the bearings. Leave me your revolver, and go straight to Helen. Tell her I say she must make no move until after daylight to-morrow. Then she must bring three or four men she can trust. Hank Henry can pick them out for her."

"But if they find you here?"

"They will not find me; and if they do, when they come along yonder, one man at a time, it will be the worse for them. I will not be too weak to hold straight. I have food here in your haversack, and water in your canteen—perhaps by to-morrow I will have the strength I thought I had when an hour or so ago I was willing to try to crawl back to Helen. I want to run no chances, though. I have the villainy of a lifetime to punish, and my daughter to protect."

He spoke so positively, and so much stronger, that Hark Hazen yielded.

He had seen enough to believe that the fears of the crippled man were not altogether groundless, and he was in no condition to himself judge as to what was the best course to pursue. Had he followed the dictates of his own judgment he might have seen the villains return; and other men who were not villains searching around the spot.

When some hours had slipped away he moved off at the urgent command of Ezra.

It was dark now, and he found some little trouble in hitting the route down the face

of the canyon wall; but succeeded in descending without the fall he more than half expected.

All was silent there, and taking his bearings as well as he could he set out to make his way to Pay Dirt, bearing in mind the well-impressed idea that he was to enter it, if at all, without being seen. His object was to reach the Ford cabin, without going to the town at all. After that, circumstances would guide him.

The distance was not so great, and he hoped to reach his goal inside of the hour. He did not take into account the dangers on the way; and after he had gained a fair offing from the canyon where he had left Ezra, perhaps he did not move with the caution he should have done.

Certainly he neither saw nor heard anything to awaken his suspicions, and when he went down from a crushing blow, delivered from behind, he lost consciousness too quickly to know what had happened to him.

When he recovered his senses he found himself lying on the broad of his back, staring straight upward at the sky, in which the stars seemed to be twinkling fainter for the coming dawn.

A glance around showed he was not in the place he last remembered, and there was nothing familiar from which he could take his bearings.

He tried to raise himself from the ground, but fell back again, overcome with the pain and dizziness in his head, produced by the effort. The night air had struck a chill to the marrow of his bones, and for the moment he thought he was about to die.

How had he come there?

There was certainly no place along the trail where he could have slipped into this gorge through an incautious step. He would at least have had a remembrance of the act of falling. After awhile, when he had gathered his wits a little better about him, and discovered his pockets were inside out, he knew he must have been stricken down and then carried hither.

Where was he? Could he find his way back to the trail? Had he strength to even make the attempt to do so?

He raised himself up; and then fell back, understanding better the feelings of Ezra Ford, lying alone in the niche in the rocks, waiting for his return.

"It is the same game over again," he moaned to himself.

"The villains must live around here; and success has made them careless. No doubt they intended to kill me outright, and throw my body where it would not soon be found. They have failed with me as they did with Ford. Only, this must be a lonesome, out-of-the-way place, without sign of trace or trail, and I don't know the land as Ezra does. It may take me a day to reach Pay Dirt—and if it does, what miseries will not Helen and her father be suffering?"

He was right.

Though his strength largely came back, and in a few hours he was attempting to travel, it was in an aimless sort of way, and he found himself at a greater loss to decide his proper course than he had thought possible. It was not till late in the day he obtained a view of the land from a peak which he climbed, and decided on what must be the right route for him to take to reach the trail to the camp.

He struck the road, however, and went stumbling forward, though night was again gathering in around him. He even recognized the spot where he must have been when stricken down. If no further harm befell him he knew now he was safe to reach the cabin of the Fords, even if he failed to find either of them there.

He struggled on bravely now; and just when the goal was won, he heard a single cry, rising from the lips of a woman, and he broke into a staggering run.

CHAPTER V.

SAILOR SAM, THE STOREKEEPER.

"It's the doctor, getting in his work; Clean Grit to the rescue; and you take a back seat till we see if you are needed!"

The touch on his shoulder stopped the intended spring of Move-along Mike, and the boy hustler glided past him.

At the first alarm he had connected the affair with the story Mike had just been telling; and though he did not understand what the game was to be he was determined to take a hand in it.

"They are not going to hit too hard, but that doesn't seem to prevent using fire-arms; guess I may as well have my own in order."

The sounds of a hasty scuffle, and a blow or two, had been followed by the sharp crack of a pistol.

"Sheer off, ye land-lubbers, or Sailor Sam 'll bring his great guns—"

There was a sudden stoppage of speech, as though the garrote had been applied after a scientific fashion, and Clean Grit, springing out of the shadow of the bushes through which he had come, saw one man struggling in the grasp of two, both of whom were masked.

Fortunately the boy approached from the rear; and was under cover until almost within reaching distance. If he had chosen he might have shot the assailants down without their knowing from what direction the lightning had struck them.

Instead, he darted straight for the nearest, and swung out his right fist as straight and as hard as he could drive it.

Through a sudden stoop the blow landed a little higher up than the boy had counted on, but all the same it cleared the road. The fellow staggered away, flinging up his hands, and vainly striving to maintain his balance, while as he lurched aside Grit's fist caught the other on the chin.

"Now, go for them, pard, and you'll find me with you!" he exclaimed, as he saw the third man staring around in a bewildered sort of a way, but without showing signs of having received any serious injury.

"Let me get at the skulking beach-combers! I'll rake 'em fore an' aft if I once get my carronades trained on 'em. Where in the name of Davy Jones's locker have they got to?"

The man was fumbling in his pocket as he spoke. If it was a weapon he was feeling for he might have been shot half a dozen times over in his bewilderment.

But the ruffians were too much concerned about their own affairs to think of troubling him.

The unexpected attack had, in ring parlance, put them all abroad, and they had not yet recovered their equilibrium when they were in flight, staggering off without a single glance behind to see who had discomfited them.

It was time for them to be going if they wanted to save their bacon.

The shot brought more than one man in that direction, as the noise of running footsteps attested.

"Avast there, with your laughing! It may have been fun for you, but it was mighty near to shipwreck for me. I felt there were three feet of water in the hold, and the crew too weak to man the pumps."

"I guess the leak is stopped; is it worth while to put a couple in the other craft?"

Clean Grit threw up his hands as he spoke. It was rather long pistol range, but a snap shot might still reach one of the retreating figures.

"Let 'em go, pard, let 'em go! You met the boarders just in time, an' there's no harm done. Here's the hand of Sailor Sam; an' he's a man who don't forget a good turn, done in time of need. I'm due at the storehouse in ten minutes by the glass, but there's time to take a drink on it if you ever indulge

in a caulk; and if you don't I can thankee all the same."

"Never drink, thank you; but you do me proud to shake. Are these your friends coming or are they more of the same gang?"

"Friends they are, for they fly the same old gridiron that Sailor Sam cruises under. Give us your rank to clap on the sailing list and I'll let them know when they come on board who the tautest little middy is that I ever cruised with."

"Clean Grit is handle enough to float through Pay Dirt with, and as I'm a stranger in the camp I don't object to a good send-off."

By this time the detachment of citizens had arrived, and there was much congratulation when the state of affairs was explained. An immediate adjournment to the Early Bird Saloon was made, and the escape celebrated with a drink all around.

Then, after renewed congratulations, Sailor Sam hurried away, leaving the boy with a large assortment of fresh acquaintances on hand.

"Looks to be in a mighty big hurry to leave good company. What's drawing him so hard?"

The question of Clean Grit brought an unexpected answer from the man at his side.

"Don't yer know? He's ther storekeeper, hyer, an' hez ter be on guard soon as he kin."

"Storekeeper?" asked the boy hustler, somewhat puzzled by the expression.

"Yes; don't yer onderstand?"

"Pay Dirt is a tough camp, an' it got ter be sich a reg'lar thing fur a man ter lose his clean-up thet we thought it was time ter shut down on it. We got a little fort up thar, on ther high ground, and a guard ter back it. Purty much all ther coin in ther camp are up thar now, under guard, an' Captain Sam are chief cook an' bottle-washer. Betcher they wanted ter git at ther key. Though it wouldn't 'a' done 'em much good."

"Sort of a bank, eh?"

"Kinder that way. On'y, about onc't a month thar's a clean-up, an' a guard takes ther funds over ter ther 'Xpress at Poker Flat, an' each man gits his receipt, all reg'lar. It's a heap ov trouble, but they begun it when thar war more pirates than honest men, an' they'll keep it 'slong ez thar's agents on ther road."

"They've never tried the storehouse a rustle, have they?" asked the young hustler, struck with the information he had already received, and bent on getting as much more as possible.

"Nary try. It's no use. When Sam an' his guard gits in thar, and bars ther door, all Hades couldn't git in. To say nothin' ov ther revolvers, an' loop-holes, ther house are solid stone, that they couldn't dig into in a week, the ruff are plank with sheet-iron on top, an' it can't be sot afire. An' ef they went fur it I reckon we'd all be doin' suthin' afore ther fun war over."

"Regular jail-like sort of a place, Wonder if it has paid for itself in the time it has been running?"

"You bet it has. Why, with Captain Kill on ther road, ez he are jest now, an' thugs by ther dozen lyin' round loose, thar wouldn't be no safety fur no man's buckskin frum mornin' ter night, an' night ag'in ter mornin'."

"The dirt must be paying pretty well if it can keep all those sharks living."

"Right you are. Ther workers are jest a-drawin' in ther shekels. Thar are a big fortin thar now, an' next week ther guard 'll take out ther biggest pile ov oro ez ever went outen Pay Dirt at one time. But a dozen good men 'll go with it; an' Kill will hev ter hump himself ef he wants ter strike ary color ov that cargo."

"And Sailor Sam takes care of all that wealth? He must be reliable."

"Not a man with a better record in camp. Bin hyer from ther start, an' kept guard on ther fu'st handful of dust thet went inter ther storehouse. No discount on him."

Clean Grit had heard about all he wanted to for the present. As he allowed the conversation to slacken on his side the other took it up.

It was no more than natural that there should be some interest manifested in the stranger, and as the questions were not too searching they could cause no trouble. By the time they were answered, and a few words spoken here and there to men who thought it worth while to notice a boy, an hour or so had elapsed.

"Time to be looking around," thought Clean Grit, as he edged away from the throng, and found himself again upon the street.

"There is some kind of a game on foot against that same storehouse, but I don't just get the rights of it. Wonder if Mike has caught on to anything yet? If he's not on the trail he ought to be somewhere near headquarters, ready to report."

There was nothing to be seen of Move-along, however, and having a tolerably clear idea of the storehouse he drifted away in that direction.

Pay Dirt lay in a gulch.

The men who first found the diggings camped right around their claims, and won their wealth with spade and rocker from the placers at their feet.

The storehouse lay a little to one side, and on rising ground.

The reason for its location there had been two-fold. The stones of which it was built were there; and it was easier of defense in case of attack by an open force.

The boy hustler did not care to move so cautiously that if by chance noticed his actions might seem suspicious.

At the same time caution had become second nature with him. He made his way almost to the door in utter silence, and being sure that his approach had not been observed, dropped to the ground, and watched curiously for developments he somehow expected.

All seemed to be quiet inside. A light gleamed there, but for any other sign of life he watched in vain.

At one spot in the wall there were three loop holes, all in a row.

While he was watching them the light in the central one disappeared for a moment, and then reappeared.

It was not much of a signal, and yet it might be enough. Clean Grit watched and waited, to see if it was repeated, and at the same time tried to keep an eye on the town for any answer that might be given.

After a little the light darkened again; and again reappeared. He knew now that he was not mistaken.

"Something wrong in there, but I haven't it down fine enough to say anything. And it strikes me some one is coming now. Best try to get a little nearer to the door. When there is going to be a rush, it don't hurt to be well to the front. If you don't stumble, you're more apt to get there with the crowd. And I'm not one of the stumbling kind."

As he thought he stepped cautiously forward, worming his way along so that there was no danger the lights beyond would outline his form.

Then, as he paused near the threshold, the door was flung cautiously open, and he heard the rush of footsteps no great distance behind him.

"Treachery inside!" flashed through his mind, and without a care for the treble risks he ran, he partially raised from the ground, and with a pantherish bound went swooping through the doorway.

A man stood before him, holding the door

partially open, and peering down the deliverty as though in search of the coming forms. The one hand clutched the edge of the door, but the other held a revolver, and it was well that the boy was rising from the ground as he sprung, and that he had his wits well about him.

Clean Grit's head darted between the legs of this man, to whom he gave a toss that cast him clean out into the darkness, and then the door clanged to.

CHAPTER VI.

DRUNKEN DAVY AND HIS LITTLE ACCIDENT.

To turn a huge key in the lock, and shoot two heavy bolts, was for Clean Grit but the work of an instant, and the storehouse was secure.

Then the boy looked curiously around him.

He was in a small room, much like a cell in a jail. It was as void of furniture and as cheerless. Save the boy, its only occupants were two men, who were crumpled up on the floor, breathing heavily.

In the nearest one he recognized Sailor Sam.

"Wake up, old man!" he shouted, as he sprung to the sleeping sailor's side and gave him a hearty shake.

Neither the call nor the shaking had the least effect. Sailor Sam continued motionless, and the heavy breathing went on.

"Drugged he is, by all that's holy! I've got the contract to carry all by my lonesome self. Reckon it won't be a hard one if they don't get in a shot or two through the loop-holes before I get the ropes of the place. They may try that on, just to get even."

That was the only danger he could imagine for the present, for he had full confidence in the strength of the place to withstand an assault.

While he was thinking this, there came a rush against the door, which would have carried anything less strongly built off of its hinges.

"You boy, in there, open up!" growled a harsh voice.

"It may be a funny sort of a game for you, but the boys will take it just the other way if they find it out. They've hung men in this camp fur a heap sight less."

"So they ought to," responded the boy, cheerfully.

He spoke loud enough to be heard, placing his mouth near to one of the loop-holes, though careful not to get his head in range for any one outside.

"If you want to do the proper thing, run down and tell the camp that Sailor and a pard have been drugged, and the other guard lit out. I'm not opening up till the whole burg is hyer, and if you don't go away I'll begin to shoot."

He was trifling with the man outside and the latter knew it.

He made one more effort.

"So far it's only been a joke; an' it's not likely a boy like you would try anything else. You got the dead medicine on me, and that's a fact, but I don't bear malice, an' if you'll keep it dark you bet I won't say a word. Sam's sick, an' I war lookin' out to see ef I couldn't see some one to send fur the doctor."

"You bet you were, but I'll look after Sam, and we don't want the doctor hyer. Better skip before the boys come up with that rope you were talking about. I'm going to call 'em now."

Without any particular effort to hit any one, Clean Grit thrust the muzzle of his revolver through then earest loop-hole, and began a lively fusillade.

A shot on the street would have perhaps attracted little attention, but half a dozen in the neighborhood of the store-house, where half the prosperous miners in the town had an interest, was a different thing.

The very first report called attention to the spot, while the second started a living stream up the hill.

As the crowd came with much shouting, and some shooting, those outside had fair warnings, of which they immediately took advantage. There was a brief, muttered consultation, and then they were off.

The moment Clean Grit knew help was coming he turned his attention to the two drugged men.

"It must have been done when we were taking that chance to celebrate, at the Early Bird. The other affair was just to throw him off his guard. Wonder if it's for good and all, or whether he'll come around when the clouds roll by. There's not much I can do."

There was a pail of water standing near, and some of this Clean Grit dashed in the faces of the men, and then began to chafe Sam's wrists and temples.

While thus engaged he heard the people of Pay Dirt at the door.

"Hoy! Hello!" shouted the first arrival.

"What's wrong in thar? Who was doing all that shooting, and what war it about?"

"Guess I'm the antelope to do the talking. There's something wrong here, and I don't open up till I know the half of Pay Dirt is hyer."

"And if you see anything of a gang out there take 'em in. Unless I'm wide off they were trying to rob the store."

"Say! You don't belong in there—where is Sailor Sam?"

Another voice outside had taken up the refrain.

"Sam can't speak for himself, and one of his pards is afflicted after the same fashion. I found the door wide open and popped in and shot the bolts. Just in time, too. The coin is safe, and as soon as you get a dozen there I'll let you in, and you can see the rest; but you want to come mighty careful. My siege guns are loaded again, and I'll train 'em on the first man that looks like crooked business."

The increasing clamor at the door showed there were fresh arrivals, and if there were not a dozen men there they made noise enough for sixty.

When, at length, Clean Grit felt sure there was no further danger from the land pirates, he pushed back the bolts, turned the key, and then sprung to one side, his hands near to his revolvers.

In surged the crowd—and along with the procession came Move-along Mike, who took the opportunity to whisper:

"One of ther culls came back again, but which one he is in the crowd I'll never tell. Stow it, though, till you find out."

A number of the men paid immediate attention to Sailor Sam; some examined the outside of a stout, well-locked chest in one corner, while the rest pounced upon the boy hustler for an explanation.

It was just as well for his personal comfort that he had been seen not long before, and was recognized as the lad who once before, that night, had come to the keeper's assistance. Otherwise he might have had to undergo some rough handling.

In fact, he was seized upon rather uncereemoniously by one or two, who did not know of what had occurred before Sam went on guard; but others interfered.

"Let up on him, thar!" said the man with whom Clean Grit had held the somewhat lengthy conversation already described.

"Ther boy's all right; an' ef he wasn't, guess thar's enuf ov us hyer ter attend to his keepin'. Spit it out, youngster. W'at's bin a-happenin'; an' how did yer come ter drop to it?"

"There's been a try at the treasure. One of the guards was in it, and the other two were drugged. I got into the mix more by luck than judgment, and just in time. That was my gun you heard, and now that

Pay Dirt is hyer it can run things to suit it self."

"W'os tha' cher sayin'?" mumbled a thick voice, as a man staggered through the door, holding in his hand an enormous, old-fashioned revolver.

"Puttin'—hic!—on style wi' Pay Dirt! Le'mme at him—hic! Git a rope—hic! Tha' shur way ter twist ther truth outen him."

The new-comer was rough, dirty and ragged.

His face was red from drink, while the reckless way he flourished his pistol, the hammer of which was back, ready for business, might have made a nervous man wince.

The muzzle seemed to gyrate more and more in the direction of Clean Grit, who, however, was more or less screened by the crowd, through which the man was trying to force his way.

Such a man may be dangerous to both friend and foe. Clean Grit had him lined before he had half crossed the room.

"Excuse me, Mister Man, but, drunk or sober, I don't have one of those things pointed my way without keeping the drop on the man holding it. Put it up, yourself, or somebody put it up for you, or *down you go*." The lad had seen to much of wild life not to recognize shoot in an eye that said it, and he had no intention of allowing this man to stir up a hornets' nest, worthless though he might be.

The fellow hesitated a moment, and in that hesitation Clean Grit saw that he was not as drunk as he seemed, and continued to hold the drop more carefully than ever.

"Wh'ozzat yer shay?" mumbled the man, dropping the muzzle of his revolver, however.

"Men ov Pay Dirt, kin sich thingsh be? Kin yer see er feller townshman bluffed by er sthranger kid, when he's movin' in ther caushe ov morali—hic—she?"

"All right, Davy; we'll stand by you; but, put up that barker. The boy is the pure quill."

And then, turning to Clean Grit, the speaker added:

"It's only Drunken Davy, an' he wouldn't hurt a fly on the wall. He's been toting that old cannon 'round town for a year when he wasn't too drunk to stagger under it, an' he's never hurt any one yit."

"That don't say he won't, some day. I'm not taking chances. When the muzzle once points square my way again he's a dead man. Perhaps I don't know him as well as you do—and, what's more, I don't want to."

"Oh, put up your pistol, Davy. The kid's all right, but he means what he says, and we don't want to lose you. Here, I'll take care of it."

The speaker suddenly bent over, and with a powerful wrench twisted the revolver out of the old fellow's hand, and dropped it into his pocket. He had no great fear that Davy was up to serious mischief; but he could understand the feelings of the boy, and did not want to see any trouble if it could be avoided.

Instead of the wrath that might have been expected to follow the action there was a howl from Davy, who almost instantly burst into tears.

"Oh-h! He's tuk—hic—me gun! Pore ole Davy, w'ot's never hurt nobody, an' war doin' ther best he could fur his frien's—hic!—in Pay Dirt. Le'mme die now, an' lay me down ter sleep! Shoot me, youngster—jest ez you p'izened pore Sam, an' when we're all three dead an' berryed, let 'em—oh, let 'em—hic—recommember we died fur our kedentry!"

He rocked himself to and fro in his grief for a moment; made a pitiful appeal to the man who had confiscated his weapon; and then staggered toward the door.

"Oh, you're too hard on Davy," exclaimed more than one, attention having been drawn

away from Sam and his pard by the little disturbance.

They could not all be nurses, and this was something newer.

"You'll break his heart if you take that gun away. Why, he's told you a dozen times that was the thing he fit with in the war."

"Blame his old gun! I don't want it," answered the man, apparently somewhat ashamed of himself.

"I only wanted to see he didn't get into trouble. Here, Davy, I'll fix it so you can't do any hurt, and then you can take your old fowling-piece and go! Reckon we don't want you here till you are sober enough to keep your mouth shut while men are talking."

Defly the man cast the charges out of the weapon, and as Davy came shambling forward again, handed it to him.

"Thankee, boss; I knowed you warn't—goin' ter be too hard on ole Davy, an' I don't bear no malice. But fur that leetle skimplejack—oh, some day when me tool's fixed I'll be even with him, jess so!"

With a quick motion he threw up the muzzle of the pistol, until it rested in line with the breast of Clean Grit.

Then, he pulled the trigger; there was a thunderous roar, and a blinding flash, as the boy dropped to the floor.

CHAPTER VII.

"HANDS UP, OR CROAK."

THE surprise of nearly every one in the room was complete.

No one was more thoroughly bewildered than the man who had cast the cartridges out of the weapon, and who could have sworn that it was harmless. A fierce execration dropped from his lips as he saw Clean Grit go down.

There were two there who had not been taken off their guard.

After what every one had just seen, Clean Grit scarcely cared to run the risk of taking a snap shot at old Davy, as the weapon of the latter came up, for if it should be found empty there might be little mercy for the boy.

Nevertheless, he was taking no chances after the warning he had already given. At the instant Drunken Davy's finger was tightening on the trigger, Clean Grit flung himself forward, so that the bullet meant for his heart, really passed over his head.

As he went down, he saw, too, the face of Move-along Mike at the shooter's elbow, and saw the quick thrust of his hand which sent the ball still higher above its mark.

Clean Grit was doubly safe.

When he scrambled to his feet he heard more than one expression of wonder, though no one seemed to think it more than a strange accident that a cartridge should be left in the pistol.

The boy said nothing, but shook his head as he thought to himself:

"Accident be blessed! The twist of the wrist beats eyesight, and I didn't see it; but I know he wasn't too drunk to change the pistols. I'll keep an eye on Drunken Davy!"

Just at this time the efforts of those who had been working with Sailor Sam and his pard were crowned with success.

Life began to come back to the storekeeper. His muscles twitched, his eyes opened, and he made an effort to sit up.

The cheer following this attention was directed from Clean Grit, when it was once seen he was alive and unharmed.

After a little Sam was able to speak; but to the disappointment of many he had very little of a story to tell. All he knew was that shortly after the door had been locked consciousness faded away.

Seeing that he would probably be unnoticed for a time, Clean Grit looked around for his pard, but only to find that he had disappeared.

"On the track of Drunken Davy, for safe bet," was his thought, as he, too, glided out of the room.

"When he comes back he'll have a little story to tell, if I'm not away off. Suppose I'll have to wait for him somewhere near. If I go to wandering around he won't know where to look for me; and we two had better stick together. We have slumped into the swim, and if we don't look out we'll be into the soup a little later on."

He did not have long to wait, however.

Move-along Mike came stealing along, and at a low signal recognized his pard.

"A close call it was, cully," said Mike, as he dropped to the grass, by the side of his friend.

"I stagged the guy's nibs to his ken, an' very lush he was if you can swear to what you can see. He bunked into his doss with his daisy-crushers on, an' was snoring in the turn of your thumb; but all the same he's a good man to keep your peepers on. He has it in for you big, an' some day he'll try it ag'in."

"Why?"

Clean Grit was inclined to be thoughtful, and his question showed he believed there was something beyond what had appeared on the surface, to account for the accident.

"Can't prove it by me, unless he got his orders from the sawbones. It ain't far to Davy's shebang; s'pose we go an' knock the truth out of him? If my mother's darling can't crack the crib, an' have him by the wattles before he gets his listeners open you can call me a hickjock."

"Oh, drop your slang, Mike. Any one to hear you would swear your reformation wasn't more than skin deep. As for Davy, he musf go for the night. I want to hear the latest from Ezra; and if he doesn't turn up, alive or dead, we have our contract all written out for to-morrow. He has got to be found if it takes a wheel."

Mike looked at his pard a little queerly; but said nothing. That same reformation of which Clean Grit had spoken had not been accomplished without a struggle; and the boy hustler had done much toward holding him straight.

It had been a year since he had heard any one speak the slang of the slums, yet it came so naturally to his lips that unless constantly on guard he fell into his old time methods of speech.

For some little time they continued to converse together, and then sought the town, and separate lodging-places. As already hinted, it was no plan of theirs to be at present known as pards.

Early morning found them out and making their way toward the canyon where Ezra had been found but to disappear again in so mysterious a fashion. Some of the searching party had returned before the pards had left town, but they brought no intelligence of the missing man.

To the average youth the outlook for accomplishing anything would have been discouraging; but Clean Grit was something above the average, and did not lose hope. Together the two sought the canyon, which they found without much difficulty.

It was not to be expected the eyes of the boys would be so much better than those of the men who had already explored the spot.

But Clean Grit did not intend to depend entirely upon his eyes.

As he had already been assured, there was no seeing how Ezra Ford got away; as the next best thing he intended, after looking over the lay of the land, to guess how he *might* have got away.

He found even that a more difficult task than he had expected.

"For a fair guess," he said, when he had

looked the ground over, "I would say he hadn't been hyer at all. If he was, and was as badly off as they say, it's dead open and shut that he was helped away. Who did it is what we have got to find out."

"An' how they did it, pard; an' what for. Looks as though some of the gang might have had a hand in it."

"Yes—or there would have been news in town before this. Unless Ezra has reasons for keeping dark."

"Which same might be the doctor."

"Right you are; but I expect if we want to find out any more we have got to get up there."

He pointed upward, though he shook his head as he spoke.

It seemed no use to try to scale the precipice at that particular spot, and there was no telling how far they would have to journey before they would come to a practicable route up this one of the two rocky walls that hemmed them in.

"Got ter try it, I s'pose; but it's a contract ther pride ov my fambly don't prezackly fancy. No tellin' when we'll git thar, or who we'll find when we reach it."

"Might see how far up we can go here. If we could get a dozen yards we might find something."

But though they made the effort, upward progress was impossible.

For the present they might be beaten, but they were not discouraged.

"Never do to give it up so. If this place won't do, try another one. That's what we're hyer for. I'm goin' to see what's up there if it has to be done by moonlight."

With this fixed resolve in his head Clean Grit led the way along the canyon, looking upward as he went, in search of a practicable route.

The contract was a larger one, however, then they had really dreamed, and after an hour or so spent in vain efforts they were glad to take rest and luncheon together.

Once at work again, and less time was wasted in examination. The two kept moving on, believing, from the looks of things, the canyon would rapidly grow shallower. It began to look as though the best way out was through the upper end.

They were already so far from the spot where it was entered, that to return there was almost the same as going back to Pay Dirt.

The hasty description, heard but once, had hardly posted them in regard to all the points in the lay of the land, and if they had been able to point directly in the direction of Pay Dirt, it would have been little short of a miracle.

Perhaps they would have been surprised if any one had told them how near the camp really was.

"Begins to look better," laughed Clean Grit, as at last they thought they saw the way clear before them.

"Stow it, though," he added, in a lower tone.

"Just as well to not be so chaffey; it seems to me I smell smoke."

The warning was not unheeded; and, indeed, there was little danger of Clean Grit being boisterous for the next few minutes. He was not far from the top of the rock; but he was in the most difficult part of the upward journey. Slowly, though surely, he was drawing himself up over a projecting shelf.

Once on top of this and he felt at ease in regard to himself, but looked back over his shoulder at Move-along Mike, who was just below him.

As he looked he saw the hand of Mike slip from the rock it had been clutching, and as the boy slipped downward, he felt the cold muzzle of a revolver pressed against his head, while in his ear a voice gritted:

"We're taking no chances, sonny; hands up, or croak!"

CHAPTER VIII.

BEFORE THE FLOOD.

IN spite of the care he had taken, and expected to take, Clean Grit had been surprised in the very worst kind of a way.

He did not recognize the tone of the voice; but he had little doubt that it belonged to some one who meant business; and he acted just as he always expected any one else to do when he held them in the same fashion. Promptly he threw up his hands.

"Not as big a fool as he looks," laughed the same voice, in an altered tone.

"Guess we can have a comfortable time, after all."

"Thanks for that good opinion of yours; but if you please, don't bore that thing with a hole in it quite through my head. It will do every bit as much good a foot away, and I will be feeling twice at comfortable. Say what you want, and I reckon, under the circumstances, you'll get it, if you're not too altogether rough on a lone orphan, who has worn his toenails right down to the quick prospecting; and neaver struck ary color."

"The color will come fast enough, my laddy. Just step off the way you are facing, till I tell you to stop. I have been looking out for a boy of your size, but you have fooled me bad. They told me you would give lots of trouble. Instead of that you are as innocent a little lamb as I could hope to find alone on the mountains, wild and bare."

Clean Grit had not hesitated, but at the order to step out moved away with his hands still elevated.

"That's right!" he flung back at the man, who, as yet had kept behind him.

"Jump on me, with both feet, won't you? I'd sooner be a live lamb than a dead lion, now don't you forget. Wouldn't you?"

"Well, yes, sonny; but I don't figure it up that you are exactly either. I'm not trusting to anything of the kind, anyhow. Keep on walking. You are doing first rate, and it won't be long before you get there."

It was evident from the talk of the fellow that he had not seen Move-along Mike, and Clean Grit did not intend he should if it could be prevented.

He strode away quite cheerfully, since, if this man was alone, every step rendered the discovery of his pard less likely.

His captor told the truth when he said they would not have far to go. A minute or two sufficed to take them away from the edge of the canyon, and into a thicket where the boy could not see a dozen yards ahead of him, though a faint path under his feet showed which way to direct his course. At his heels he could all the time hear the steps of his captor.

Then, suddenly he came upon a little opening, and was confronted by a rough-looking man with a revolver in his hand, who threw up the weapon with a readiness which seemed to have been born of much practice. Had it not been for a word of warning from the rear he might have made wild work.

"Hold on there, Brick! This kid is my meat. I want to put him in soak with you till the captain comes. If it's not the laddy we had orders about I'm away off. It might save time and trouble if you let him have the lead pill right away, but you know how Kill is. If it wa'n't the right thing at the right place he'd be apt to raise a howl."

"Ef that hed bin sed a bit later thar would 'a bin a accerdent," growled Brick, putting away his gun with some show of disgust.

"Next time yer wants ter let me know who's comin' behind, er thar mought be some trouble in yer stomjack, er wherever ther stray lead lit. I don't jest reckon Capt'n Kill'd keer ter see him hyar with all both eyes open, an' yer better git a rag on 'em. I think I hear him a-comin' now."

"Guess ef he's dead meat once it won't make much dif' whether there is a rag over his face er not. But if you are afraid of him I can put it there. Steady, youngster! Here's a hanky-pockerchum that I think will fill the bill."

Carelessly though he tried to speak, the man seemed to have a wholesome dread of Captain Kill, and executed his work of blindfolding the prisoner with neatness and dispatch.

Before the work was altogether finished the sound of approaching footsteps became quite audible.

After that Clean Grit could see nothing at all, and submitted himself to the guidance of the other, or at least to his wishes, without a word of protest. There was some further conversation between the two outlaws—for such the boy judged them to be—and then one of them returned toward the spot where the capture had been made.

Then, there was a new-comer, who listened to some brief explanations, before he turned his attention to Clean Grit.

"You are the boy, I believe. You look fresh, very, and I don't see anything better for you to do than to quit work at the end of a rope. Hang him up, Brick, before he makes more trouble. When a man or boy puts his oar into my affairs without rhyme or reason I treat him like a bloody pirate."

There was quite too much matter of fact about the way he spoke to be altogether pleasing to the boy, but he never flinched, though he could imagine how the keen eyes of the speaker were looking him over. Perhaps, too, this was a bluff of some kind, to force a knowledge of the size of his hand.

Brick took it in earnest, however; and it was not hard to tell he was not altogether pleased with the orders, carefully as he tried to disguise the fact.

"All right, cap'n; you're ther doctor. But ef I mou't be so bold ez ter ree-mark, this hyar kid are not prezackly my meat, an' it looks kinder introodin' fur me ter take ther job outen Jolly's hands. P'raps it would be a encouragement to him ef you war ter let me call him in an' finish ther fun, jest ez he begun ther racket."

"Which means that you don't want to assist the youngster to stretch hemp. Some men have prejudices of that kind—hate to bother with women and children, you know—but I didn't suppose you were one of the sort. Jolly can't be spared from where he is; and I want you. What are you going to do with the kid? Turn him loose?"

There was a proper scorn in the voice of the outlaw chief, but Brick was not tender skinned, and never winced.

"I kin tie him up hyar tell Jolly does come. Still, orders is orders, an' ef you say so, cap'n, hyar's a rope, an' thar's a tree."

"Coming to your senses, are you? All right. Draw his teeth and truss him up. I never want to spur a willing horse, unless I happen to be in a hurry. Even if he was forgotten there would be nothing but bones left by the time any one else found him. No signs of any one from Pay Dirt in the canyon?"

"Nary sign, 'ceptin' them w'ot this kid made, an' I jedge, ez he's playin' a lone hand, them don't count."

The captain seemed to be in a good humor. He hummed a tune softly to himself, while waiting for Brick to trice up the youngster; and when that operation was completed, led him away, leaving Clean Grit bound, gagged, and decidedly uncomfortable both in body and mind.

"There's some move afoot," he thought, "that I ought to get on to, but if this thing keeps up any length of time it's a sum in higher mathematics this interesting individual will hardly work out."

"If Mike don't come I'm elected for a good long wait hyer, with a chance for a tough time at the end of it."

"And if he does try to come, there's Jolly and his revolvers at the head of the only known stairway. If I hadn't trusted so often to Michael, without his ever fooling me once, I would say the best thing he can do is to stay out."

Michael did not come, however, and the minutes seemed to drag along with an agonizing slowness—though perhaps they went faster than Clean Grit had any idea of.

And there was a possibility that Jolly might come at any moment, and complete the task left unfinished by the reluctant Brick.

From time to time Clean Grit made an effort to free himself—not a frantic one, but with all coolness and deliberation. He was not a boy to waste his strength, or lose his head, in the presence of danger.

He knew he had once frustrated the plans of Captain Kill, and was not certain but he had done it twice. Though the unseen captain's speech had not sounded familiar, it was possible the tones had been disguised.

At all events the boy hustler had made up his mind there was a close connection between Kill and Doctor Hanshaw, though he would not have liked, as yet, to air his opinion in Pay Dirt.

As he had intended, the efforts he had been making had not been altogether in vain. He had been feeling for the weak spot—if there was any—and he gave a stronger tug than ever, under the excitement of the thought of what might happen if he did not escape, he fancied he had found it.

"Glory to the ram!" he muttered. "That knot will slip if I get the right purchase on it!"

After that the rest was slow but sure.

In the end he went gliding away in the direction he believed the two outlaws had taken.

He had not much hopes of being able to find them, for night was coming on fast, and it would soon be too dark to follow the trail which was guiding his steps. The mountain was unknown to him, and no doubt the retreat of Captain Kill and his band was so well concealed as at any time to baffle search.

Yet he was more fortunate than he had dreamed of being, since he came suddenly upon the gang, and at dangerously close quarters. A little glade opened out in front of him, and he looked down upon Captain Kill and his men at work.

At first sight Clean Grit thought they had struck a mine, and were working it on the sly.

Then, as he glanced around, took in the lay of the land, and saw the broad sheet of water, held back by the dam at the breast of which they were working, he caught the idea of what they were attempting, and something like a chill of horror shot through him, from chin to knees.

They were cutting a channel to the already weakened breast of the dam, and intended to send the whole vast body of water down the canyon to wipe Pay Dirt out of existence!

Not every one could have caught so quickly the meaning of what he saw by the uncertain light, or noted how thoroughly he was hemmed in by the lay of the land, and the men, who would, without a doubt, prevent his escape at any cost, now that he had seen them at work.

Though there was no danger the dam would be broken for some hours, yet, even if he could make his escape, could he reach the town in time to give warning of what would no doubt be close behind, even if it did not overtake him on the way?

"If Brick had been kind enough to leave me my guns I might stand a chance; and if Mike was here to back-set me I'd engage to stop the whole performance before it went a step further. As it is, I'll have to try the quiet dodge, and if I lose too much time at it, so much the worse for Pay Dirt."

So he muttered, looking from this side to that like a caged rat.

While it might have been easier to dodge the sentinel at the head of the canyon behind him, he knew the route that way was a long one, and believed that, however great the risks, his best course was down this gorge.

CHAPTER IX.

THE RACE WITH CAPTAIN KILL.

CLEAN GRIT had courage for any undertaking, however desperate it might be, yet he had prudence, too, and did not care to throw away his life when so much was dependent upon it.

It would take some time to finish the work, even if it was pushed along as rapidly as possible, and it did not seem likely there would be any effort to actually start the water on its way until later on, when the town would, for the most part, be buried in slumber.

If he could only keep himself hidden for a while, there might be an opportunity to glide past the outlaws in the darkness.

There was one thing he did not take into account:—Captain Kill might desire another interview with his prisoner before giving the finishing stroke, and in that case, unless he could find a better hiding place, discovery was certain.

That was exactly what did occur.

After some waiting and watching, in the vain hope of seeing the way clear enough to risk an effort, Clean Grit, whose senses were all on the alert, noticed that one man, who evidently had been directing the labor, handed the torch he had been holding, to one of the workers, and stepped to one side.

"Business, by the holy poker! Which way is he coming? I've got to know so I can go the other. The time for fooling is played out, and there will be a big break, or a dead boy, mighty soon."

So much Clean Grit had time to decide; then he heard nearing footsteps, and, an instant later, a dark form loomed up immediately in front of him.

With every nerve and muscle braced for the work, Clean Grit gave a great spring at the man who was coming lightly up the steep and rocky path.

The boy hustler struck as he came, and the blow was one of the stoutest he knew how to deliver. Captain Kill went staggering back, vainly attempting to recover his balance; but measured his length upon the ground.

As his heels were up-hill, and his head down, there was not much chance for him to recover his balance at once, even if he had not been half stunned by the blow, and by the shock of the fall. And the best of it all was, the thing was done so quietly no alarm was given, and Clean Grit had still a moment of respite before beginning the struggle which he knew must come.

That moment he put to the best use he could think of.

He made a leap at the prostrate man, and landed on him with both feet.

Then, he stooped, and rapidly possessed himself of the pistols in his belt. With a revolver in either hand he felt like himself again, and without hesitation skurried down the bank.

It was barely possible he might get past the bulk of the men before being observed, and after that he was willing to face the sentinel, who seemed to be stationed on the only line by which he could reach the gorge down which he had decided to take his course.

The detour probably saved him, for the moment Captain Kill recovered his breath and wits—nor did it take long—he uttered a cry which alarmed the men, who came rushing toward the spot. The sentinel alone remained at his post, and he was looking keenly in that direction

Fortunately for the boy hustler, the glare of the wavering torches confused the sight of the man, otherwise he might have caught a glimpse of a skulking form, rapidly but noiselessly approaching him.

He did peer from this side to that, but the first intimation of Clean Grit's presence was when the boy rose suddenly at his side, and struck savagely with a clubbed revolver.

Once more luck was on the boy's side, for by that one stroke Clean Grit cleared the path. The way down the gorge was now open to him, and if he did not immediately take it, it was because he had made a discovery.

Behind the sentinel was a little niche; and in that niche the very thing he wanted!

"Take my kingdom, pards! By the holy maverick, hyer's a horse!"

There was danger even in the brief delay to see how tightly it was tethered, but Clean Grit was willing to take the chances, since it might insure the success that had seemed to be doubtful at the best.

His eyes could not help him much, but his hands were practiced. He did not waste time trying to undo the knot by which the animal was fastened, but slipped halter and bridle off, and, turning the horse's head in the direction he wanted him to go, he sprang upon his back and urged him forward, gripping tightly with his knees. If the animal was broken as he should be, the young hustler was willing to risk his neck in the mad ride to follow.

Like an arrow from a bow the daring youth darted away, laying low along his horse's back, perfectly silent and motionless. If he could escape without being seen, so much the better. It might be it would save a volley, which would cripple the horse, even if it did not injure him.

A minute later and he had almost forgotten, as he had ceased to hear, the shouts and shots behind him, in the excitement of the headlong flight down the dangerous darkness of the ragged road.

"They will let her go now, as soon as pick and shovel can make a way," was his thought.

"It will come like a house afire, and if it catches us hyer there's not much chance for either of us. Sail on, Eucephalous! I'll take a broken neck before drowning, any night."

On, on, went the two, the horse never faltering, and avoiding the boulders with a promptness that showed he was well acquainted with the way, while on his back clung the young hustler, almost breathless with the excitement of the wild ride down the steps and narrow gorge.

A slip or a stumble pretty nearly meant certain death, and the dangers arising around him were but plain enough to terrify a weak heart, without being seen so distinctly as to give an opportunity to avoid.

As he flitted on, trying to decide whether the furious race was taking him nearer to Pay Dirt, he heard a muffled roar up the mountain behind him.

He could guess what that meant!

The dam was gone, and the water was coming! He was surely as yet in the right road, and there was nothing for him to do but fly onward and downward until the steed faltered, left the course, or brought him to his journey's end.

He had not been many minutes on his flight, but it seemed as though he had passed over miles; and now he heard a distant rumble. It was only a question of a few moments more which would reach the town first—he, or the water!

Then, suddenly, he swept around a bend in the canyon, and Pay Dirt lay before him, the first of its scattered cabins almost at his hand.

Instantly, and for the first time, his tongue found voice.

He gave a wild yell that would not have disgraced an Apache.

After that, he followed up with words of warning.

"Up! Hi! Hello! The water is coming, and Captain Kill with it! Save yourselves, and rally at the storehouse!"

Down the long, narrow street he swept, shooting off his revolvers and keeping up his yells. He made noise enough for a dozen, and if there was any one in the probable path of the flood who did not hear him he must have been a descendant of one of the Seven Sleepers.

The hour was later even than Clean Grit had thought, and the best part of the responsible citizens of Pay Dirt were in bed, and snoring, when he made his advent.

If he had confined himself to a few yells, as he went along, they might have wakened, indeed, but they would have turned over and gone to sleep again. Noises on the street, and ruffians shooting up the town at midnight, were no new things there, and at such times honest men stayed in the house till the storm blew over.

But the shots punctuated the yells; and the name of Captain Kill, and the mention of the storehouse, brought men scrambling out in all directions—and they generally came with a revolver in hand.

After that, they heard the roar of the water up the gorge, and retreated without delay to the high ground on which stood the little fort.

Clean Grit went there, too.

At the end of the town his steed attempted to swerve to one side, along a faint trail leading away from the main track, and which led to Cottor's Ranch.

At this point the gulch in which the town was largely built widened out, so there was but little danger for those who lived beyond, and it was not worth while to waste time warning them. Lightly the lad dropped from the back of the animal, which he had no power to check, and ran to join the crowd that had already reached the neighborhood of the storehouse.

As he gained the throng Sailor Sam came to one of the loop-holes.

"Men of Pay Dirt, ahoy! What in the name of ther great white whale are ther matters?"

"That!" answered Clean Grit, pointing to the white capped wave which was dimly to be seen striding down the valley.

"Yonder comes the water of the dam in the mountains—and hyer is Captain Kill and his heroes!"

In the rear of the storehouse they heard the clatter of the feet of many horses.

CHAPTER X.

FIRE AS WELL AS WATER.

No doubt the calculations of Captain Kill would have turned out to be shrewd enough had it not been for the boy hustler.

While it was possible, though not positive, that some lives would be lost in the flood, it was certain that if it came upon them suddenly, unexpectedly, and at dead of night, the men of Pay Dirt would be too much concerned about their habitations and effects, to say nothing of their own safety, to pay much attention to what was going on at the hill.

And the lay of the land was such that those who sought high ground would naturally take to the other side of the gulch.

Counting on this the outlaws were making a straight dash for the rear of the cabin, anticipating little or no resistance from without, and feeling abundantly able to take care of any they might meet with from within.

"Hold on, men, and give them a sickener!" exclaimed Clean Grit, as he saw a rush was about to be made for the rear of the house.

"It's too late to think about things down

in the gulch, but hyer's your chance to get even with the men who set them afloat. Drop, can't you, and give them all they want when they come within range!"

The word was hastily passed along, and as hastily acted upon. In a minute a dozen men had crawled on their hands and knees to where they could command a view of the storehouse, and were watching eagerly the dark forms that were already almost within pistol range.

It looked as though they were going to get the surprise of the season upon the outlaws.

And so they no doubt would have done had it not been for a warning given in the very nick of time.

From a point on the hillside not a hundred yards away to the left and rear of the ambuscaders there suddenly arose a wild cry, like the scream of a panther.

It might have been taken for the yell of some cougar, forced from his den along the canyon by the water, had it not been for the immediate effect it had upon the marauders.

They halted as quickly as though they had received an order on parade, wheeled about, and were off at even more breakneck speed than that at which they came.

A few straggling shots followed them, but the men of Pay Dirt were not of the kind to waste ammunition; and pursuit was hardly to be thought of, though half a dozen of the miners pushed forward for some distance to make sure the retreat was final.

Clean Grit was the one who understood the cry first of all, and his eyes were on the spot from which it seemed to come before the sound had ended.

He thought he could descry the dark outlines of a human figure, crouching low, and without hesitation took a snap shot in that direction.

As his fingers tightened on the trigger the shadow appeared to melt away. It is doubtful if any one else noted it at all; but half a dozen followed the boy in his rush to the spot, and two or three of them uttered a warning that was just in time to save him from what might have been a fatal fall.

As it was, he halted on the brink of a great gath in the hillside, its sides so steep he could hardly have saved himself in another instant.

In the black gulf below he could hear the rapid patter of retreating footsteps, and then all was silence.

"No use, leetle pard," said a kindly voice at his shoulder, on which a detaining hand was laid.

"Ef ther critter war a Injun, ez most likely he war, he's outhen sight an' hearin' by this time, unless he's layin' low in ther dark ter put a knife in yer gizzard ez yer overhauls him. An' it'd take a better man ner you er me ter git safe down to ther kenyon 'thout more light on ther subject. 'Thar's places thar thet would swaller a muel, an' I reekon thar ain't no man ov Pay Dirt ez will reesk his neck thar ter-night. You see, now?"

"All right, pard. Much obliged for the warning. I might have been fool enough to try that very same thing on, though I don't set myself up to be a bigger chief than the best men in the camp. If they won't risk it I guess I won't try."

The conclusion was wise enough, for Clean Grit was quick to notice that though some of the men ran along the side of the gash, following its course down the hill, and firing an occasional random shot into its depths, no one attempted to go directly down into the darkness to which the spy of the outlaws had no doubt dropped.

"Yes, leetle pard, that's ther true platform. They're livlier ez fleas, an' when yer putts yer han's on 'em they ain't thar, ez we know ov old. They hev it in big fur ther coin in ther house, but we'll stan' 'em off yit

ef you kin allers be at ther front when ther game gits warm."

"Oh, I seem to be there or thereabouts," answered Clean Grit, carelessly.

"I don't know that I have any interests in the game, but when you fellows put up the stakes I don't see that I can object to playing the cards as they drop to my hand."

He did not know the name of the man, but he was the same with whom he had already held several conversations, and from what he had seen of him Clean Grit felt sure he was safe to tie to. He had an interest in this same storehouse, and evidently rated the boy for what he was worth.

His answer went to show he appreciated the lad.

"That's so, leetle pard; an' when you hold both bowers an' ther ace, an' ther balance trump, yer ain't afeard ter go it alone, an' lead ther biggest yer got. Pay Dirt won't be ongrateful, for she knows this are ther second time yer helped us out ov what might 'a' bin a nasty sort ov a hole. Ther boys are too busy now to care for chin, but when things git quieted down, an' we see who's dead, er badly missin', they'll want ter hear ther hull story."

"Just so they keep an eye on Drunken Davy, if he happens to be around. I don't want to have to salivate him, but if the camp wants to retain an institution they had better put him in a glass case till he learns to keep out of mischief."

"Don't be too hard on ther pore cuss. He ain't apt ter hurt ary body but hisself, an' I'll go bail he won't never hurt you. Now le's be movin' up to ther crowd. Wo't's puzzlin' me are ter know how ther agents 'spected ter make ther riddle ef they did git in ter close quarters. This time ther boyces on guard are all solid, an' no mistake."

"Better examine the fort thoroughly. They hardly expected to batter down the walls, and they may have a way in, which no one else knows of."

"Right sharp idear that, an' reckon' I'll tell it to ther boyces. It won't do no hurt ter look ter see."

"That is a true bill. But, by the way, has anything more been heard of Ezra Ford? Any traces of how he disappeared, or where he went to?"

"Not er doggoned trace. By this time I wouldn't wonder ef his gal war clean gone crazy."

"If she is living. Do you think she was in any danger from the flood?"

"Not er bit. Ther water kin in this side ov the'r lay-out."

"Yet I would like to make sure of it."

"That's good enough. Ef yer waits tell I see w'ot damage hez bin did, an' ef they don't need me hyar too bad, I'll go 'long, though I'm gamblin' we find her more skeered than hurt."

"Thanks. Just what I was going to propose."

For the present they had no more to say to each other, for they had reached the outside of the storehouse, where half a dozen men still loitered. Everybody else had gone down to view the ruins of the town, and to save what they could from the wreck as soon as the waters should sufficiently subside.

Sailor Sam was wide-awake, and very much on guard.

In fact, he had refused to open the door at all.

"Shiver my timbers, hearties!" he said, to one who spoke to him from without, "if this thing is not getting purty near down to ther water line, an' I'm taking no chances with the bloody pirates. Ther hatches are battened, ther deadlights closed, boardin' nettin's triced up, an' you can all sheer off tell mornin'. Bet your last pistareen thet Sam an' ther coin will all be hyer when you call fur 'em then."

"That's all right, Sam; but look around

sharp and see if there ain't a scuttle, open somewhere. Kill knew how he was going to get in when he charged the town."

The suggestion was the very one that Clean Grit would have made, and the answer satisfied him that Sailor Sam did not intend to be caught napping.

"So I hev, an' be blamed to yer! There's not a rat-hole open, and if there was I'd soon plug it shut with a bullet. I'm wide-awake an' the binnacle lamp a-burnin'."

In the town the damage done had been great; but not so total as might have been expected.

Not a life was lost, and only a few of the weaker shanties had entirely succumbed to the force of the torrent.

But there were few dwellings escaped without a thorough drenching of at least the lower part, both inside and out, and there was work enough for every man, on his own account, or on that of his neighbor.

The Early Bird Saloon was one of the first buildings in which the water subsided, and into this was carried one poor fellow with a broken leg. When Clean Grit and his companion entered they found Doctor Hanshaw bending over him with a face full of concern, and a touch light as a woman's.

"That's a puzzler," whispered the boy to himself.

"If he isn't, who is he? and if he is, how come he so? Unless I struck higher up than I thought, Captain Kill ought to have the print of my knuckles on his front, but I don't see it there."

There was help enough without the aid of the two, and they did not linger longer than was necessary to hear a trifle of what was said by men who spoke their thoughts out.

Then, they quietly withdrew. Helen Ford was still on the mind of the boy hustler, and he thought it was high time to be making some investigations.

The journey toward the cabin was none of the pleasantest, but it was made without delay or accident; and when they reached the little building they found that instinct had not served them badly.

The waters had not touched the house, but it was tenantless, and even as they looked, a bright glare began to show itself through the one window in its front.

Before they could reach the open door the whole dwelling was wrapped in flames.

CHAPTER XI.

EZRA FORD RETURNS.

"Wot's wrong now?" exclaimed the man, in dismay.

"That's wuss ner ther water, fur it won't leave a chip ner shingle. You don't think ther pore gal are in thar, do yer?"

He pointed at the flames as he spoke, and there was a quaver in his voice which showed how much he was moved.

"No danger of that," responded Clean Grit, moving away, however.

It might be possible to obtain something of a view within from the other side of the house, and he would like to make himself certain.

There was a bare possibility the girl had been overcome by her trouble, and was unable to make the escape, about which there could not otherwise be much difficulty.

Prompt action gave him the glimpse he desired. The smoke had drawn upward, and the glare of the fire showed the empty bunks, and that there was nothing to be seen of Miss Helen.

Then, the flames drew toward him, and Clean Grit retired. It was useless to attempt to save any of the few articles of furniture in the cabin. The fire was making too much headway, and their value would not justify the risk.

Besides, the question of what had become of Helen was troubling him more than ever. He bent his head downward, and by the glare of the fire began to look for traces and tracks.

She might be voluntarily absent, but when he remembered the scene with Doctor Hanshaw he had his doubts.

The ground was not favorable for his search.

Though an expert as a trailer he found nothing to use as a clue, and for the present decided to give it over.

If the young lady had been carried away, enough time had already elapsed to allow of her having been put far enough beyond hearing or sight.

His companion remained quietly watching the proceedings. A hint had been sufficient to post him, and he understood that, at the business Clean Grit was engaged in, one hand was perhaps better than two.

"It's no use, pard," said the boy, at length, with a sigh of disappointment. "I can't get a starter hyer, and there's no use to look further before morning. The girl's gone, and that is all we can say about it. When daylight comes I'll look the ground over again, and I reckon I can tell a different story."

The answer was interrupted by the sound of approaching footsteps. Some one was coming toward the house at a tearing gait.

While they looked, Clean Grit with his hand on his revolver, a man bounded into view, who took several steps toward the burning cabin, and then fell headlong.

He turned over, though in an exhausted manner, and glared at the burning cabin without attempting to rise.

At sight of the new-comer Clean Grit's companion staggered back, looked from one side to the other as if to pick a line of retreat, and had it not been for the hand of the boy on his arm he would most likely have run away.

"Take it easy, pard; and don't look dangerous. Who is he?"

"It's—it's a ghost!" responded the other, shaking with fear; "an' ef it ain't a ghost it's Ezzy Ford, kim back ter life ag'in."

"You bet he's very much alive, then; and he needs a little help. Poor fellow! It's rather a rough home-coming; and the worst of it is, there is no chance to break the news gently to him. If he knows you, perhaps you had better speak to him first."

The suggestion did not seem to be of the pleasantest, though the man had been reassured by the words of his young companion. He advanced with a lagging step, and bent over the prostrate Ezra.

"It's rough on yer, Ford—it's mighty rough. Brace up, though! Mebbe it will all come right. Me an' ther boy got hyer in time ter see yer da'rter wa'n't in thar, and the boyees'll chip in ter put up another shanty. Whar yer bin are w'ot they hev bin askin'. Day an' night a-scoutin' ther kenjons hev they bin, an' it'll be good fur sore eyes when they git a sight on yer ag'in."

"It is you, is it, Hank Henry? It is as well my strength failed me, or I would have been at your throat. The villains have got in their work here, too. What was the camp doing, leaving my girl here alone, and unguarded, when the villains were up and doing? Oh, I tell you, if he has harmed her I will slay him when I find him!"

"Who is that, Ezra? That is all we are waiting for. If she has had foul play all yer got ter do are ter give us a hint, an' hyar are two ter take ther trail like beagles."

But, Ford did not answer. He looked up at the man he had called Hank Henry in a hesitating way, and then shook his head.

"Perhaps I am wrong—perhaps I am wrong. And if I had not sure proof you would not believe me. Wait till I see. Wait till I see."

Clean Grit understood him, if Henry did not.

"All right, my friend. Keep it to yourself if you want to; but I wouldn't wonder if you had said enough to tell me who you are thinking of. I'll trail the girl down,

and if I find that fellow at the other end you can come in for your vengeance. But I'm willing to bet dollars to dimes you'll find Miss Helen safe and sound. She has the clean grit, like myself, and—I have no more to say now. I'll see you later."

Ford had raised himself to a sitting posture. Though he had recovered his breath he was still weak, almost, as an infant, showing he had been but temporarily sustained by excitement.

"Hide me!" he muttered. "Hide me till I get my strength back. I am in no condition to fight him now."

It was too late for hiding, however. The fire had been seen from the town, and a deputation of citizens left the work they had in hand, and came to see what was the meaning of the blaze.

To them the sight of Ezra Ford was hardly as great a surprise as the one which Clean Grit received when he recognized Move-along Mike at the tail end of the procession.

When all the rest were so much interested in Ezra Ford, and the story he might have to tell, it was not hard for the two lads to get together quietly.

"Mighty glad, Mike, to see you got out of the wilderness," was the salutation of the hustler lad.

"Glad ter hear it. I wouldn't 'a' knowed it ary other way. Didn't reckon you were aware I were lost. Didn't spend much time looking for me when I took the drop, did yer?"

"No, for a fact. I was too busy. Perhaps you saw what happened after you left?"

"Ez fur ez this court knows itself he thinks she does. It wa'n't my chip, so I held ther age an' waited ter see what you war goin' ter do. I twiggid it, too; but I laid it out to assist if the cards seemed to run too rough. Oh, you did it all very beautiful but maybe you didn't know the main guy of the gang got into town 'most as soon as you did? I couldn't fix him when I arrove on foot-back, five minutes later, but he was there, all ther same."

"Ah, that accounts for it, then! You didn't see which way he drifted when he struck the town?"

"Not for a sure thing, but for a guess I'd say he struck for Drunken Davy's lay-out. If I hadn't been wantin' to see the fun all 'round I s'pose I might 'a' made sure, but a guess are good enough ez long ez it hits plumb center to ther truth."

A few more hasty words between them, and they rejoined the little throng which was taking Ezra Ford back to the heart of the town. He had grown weaker, and there was no place nearer where he might be sheltered.

Hank Henry's shanty was a little more out of the track of the water than the rest, and he suggested the old man be carried thither and Doctor Hanshaw be summoned to look him over. Ford's hurts dated back too far for unprofessional aid to be of much account.

At the mention of doctor's name Clean Grit saw a shiver go through the frame of the seemingly unconscious man; that told him a whole story!

"He's afraid, yet dares not speak. Well and good. I'll have to take Hank a little ways into confidence, and have him keep an eye on that same doctor. How he is to prevent it if Hanshaw takes the risks, and runs in a dose of poison, I don't see; but it will have to be tried."

"And I would like to see how the doctor looks when he begins to paw over his victim. Perhaps his eyes will tell tales. I think I'll go along."

As yet there was not so much excitement about the disappearance of Helen Ford. There was so much else to think of that when some one suggested she had been frightened at the flood, and run away, the lame explan-

ation was accepted for the present. A few men remained behind, searching for her, intending to give her the news of the return of Ezra, and to bring her with them to Hank Henry's cabin, when they found her. The rest rather expected to find her in the town.

When such a big game had been played for gold it was hardly possible there was another afoot for a girl.

Nothing could be more naturally innocent than the manner of the doctor when he was brought into the presence of the returned wanderer. He examined the wound and bruises with the gravest, and most professional air, but confined his inward applications to the whisky which Hank Henry produced on request.

There was no chance for double dealing there.

"They all think he's a leetle angel on tin wheels," whispered Mike to his pard, as he noted how anxiously those nearest watched the face of the physician.

Far more of the men of Pay Dirt had crowded into the room than should have been there. The Ford mystery made them for a time almost forget the more thrilling story of the outlaws' reckless raid.

"More fools they," answered Clean Grit, in the same guarded tone. "When he leaves keep yourself somewhere not too far behind to know what becomes of him. I'll be inquiring before the night's over."

"All right. I'll pipe his nibs if he leads me to purgatory. I don't like him any too well myself."

"More like it will lead to Helen Ford," thought Clean Grit, as he turned away.

When Move-along Mike made a promise it was one to be relied on, and his pard left him on guard while he glided away to hear what was to be heard elsewhere. It seemed that, after two such bold attempts, every one would be on their guard against a third. The treasure in the storehouse was worth the trouble, certainly.

But no one seemed to anticipate any further trouble with Captain Kill, for that night, at least. He had made his swoop and failed. For another twenty-four hours the storehouse would doubtless remain unmolested, and within that time the treasure would be on the road to safety, under a guard that would render an attack but madness.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SECRETS OF DAVY'S CABIN.

"So you think," muttered Clean Grit to himself, as he listened to the sanguine prognostications of the men who were trying to find some comfort as an offset to the tribulations of the night.

"I think I know a boy who could give them a pointer worth the taking, but if they haven't sense enough to see it themselves they would never listen to him, or if they did they might be like the rest that hear good advice. Mike and I will have to play it alone, and if there's nothing in the game they won't lose much."

As he thought this, Mike touched him on the arm. He had glided up so silently that the touch was the first intimation of his presence.

"I've holed his royal nibs right where ther rest ov ther bad men go to."

"And that is at that same cabin of Drunken Davy—eh, old pard?"

"If you know it all, what's ther use ov my doin' your scoutin'?" retorted Mike, a little sulkily.

"Never mind that! You've done a big thing, anyhow. I wanted to be *sure* before we ran the risks. This time we are going to see the inside of that lay-out. I have an idea it is bigger than it looks."

The two moved away together in the direction of the cabin, but they made haste slowly. In spite of the positive way they talked, neither was likely to act rashly when there

was no pressing call for it. The outlaws probably knew who it was that had twice baffled them, and if they had confederates in the camp it was possible a spy might be on their trails.

As they wormed themselves finally into the neighborhood of the cabin they heard a voice, pitched in an undertone:

"Everything must be promptly done. The way is open, and an hour from now the move must be made."

There was no answer, but the light sound of footsteps, gradually dying away in the distance, told that a messenger had departed, while the soft shutting of a door said that he was sent by some one within Davy's cabin.

"Now, then," whispered Mike, "to crack the first crib I was ever asked to. There's an hour ahead of us, and that's plenty long to get in a heap of fine work."

It took no little courage to attempt to enter this place, even though they had no clear idea of what to expect. A false step might put them at the mercy of its inmate, or inmates, in more ways than one.

So long as they had no more convincing evidence than their suspicions, the town itself might rise at them if Davy hinted their presence meant assassination.

The work had to be done soon, and yet not too soon.

They waited for a bit, and when the light within seemed to be extinguished both boys made their advances by way of the rear window. Once within the little cabin they stood breathless for a moment, half expecting to be greeted by a shot.

Nothing of the kind, however. All was silent, and they were absolutely certain they were alone in the room.

Then there was a glow of light as what they understood must be a trap-door was raised. Almost as soon it settled back to its place, but the boys could hear light-moving footsteps, and some one passed out of the cabin by the door.

"I'd give a dime to know if that was Davy himself," whispered Clean Grit. "We ought to know what we are liable to run against if there is any way of finding out."

"Not much like his style. He'd 'a' banged his conk through ther door, an' shot out like a ram at a he goat. Mebbe Davy are in ther next room. Better go see afore we try ter raise ther trap."

"You go. If yer needs me I'm hyer; but mebbe you're able fur him yerself, an' it'd be an advantage ef one of us kept out of sight."

"That last is the clean thing, only it might be as well to work it the other way. Suppose you try it on yourself. Strikes me it's more in your line."

"That was afore I had reformed," laughed Mike, softly.

"But if you think so, hyer goes."

There was danger in even the low whispers by which the conversation was carried on, but some risks had to be run, and they had already seen enough, as they believed, to justify themselves with the men of Pay Dirt, if an explosion came before they could go further, and find more.

Very softly did Mike open the rude door which led to the still smaller room, and listening for a moment to make sure that all was still, he glided forward, closing the door again behind him.

It was the merest box of a place, but there was a bunk in the further end, reaching clear across the room—and the bunk was occupied.

More than that, he knew his presence was noted.

The party had evidently been holding his breath while Mike was pausing at the door, and now was breathing as softly as possible, and no doubt listening for his next move with close attention.

"By Jingo! It won't do to shoot till I

know what the mark is," thought Mike, in some perplexity, "and if I try to get out of this the chances are he'll shoot me. Hyer is a purty fix fur my mother's owney-downey."

While he hesitated he received something like a shock.

A low whisper came from the bunk!

"If ye'r white, an' not standin' in wi' ther cussid thieves, give pore ole Davy a lift! Ef yer ain't white ther ain't no harm done ter ax yer."

Mike still hesitated. This might be only a trap. He noiselessly changed his position, and waited for further information.

"Oh, it's straight goods I'm a-givin' yer. Ef yer don't b'leve it strike a match, an' see how they hev me trussed up. Fur a day an' a night, fur a hull, weary day an' a night. An' I'm that dry, water 'd sizz ef it tetched my throat, an' I kin see ther snakes wiggle up an' down ther wall by ther barrel."

With a match in one hand and his revolver in the other, Mike crept noiselessly up until he could touch the bunk.

The voice evidently came from there, and while he intended to see who was the speaker, he meant to keep on the line of safety while doing it.

Reaching over, he thrust the muzzle of his pistol forward until he felt it rest against the face of the speaker.

"You'll be hotter yet," he said, in a whisper, "if you try any gum-games on ther undersigned. If you move I pull. Hold still while I show a glim, an' then, mebbe, I'll be ready ter talk to yer."

With this warning he struck the match, and held it up.

It was Drunken Davy, sure enough; but in such a plight as Mike had hardly expected to see.

Ropes were around his wrists and ankles; while another stout cord about his waist held him firmly to the bunk. Near his mouth lay a gag as it had fallen, while the severed string which had confined it in place had evidently been chewed in two.

"I've bin hyer fur a hull day an' a night, ef not more," he moaned.

"It's sober I am, fur ez whisky goes, but I'm jest blind drunk ter git ree-venge. Holp me outen this, boy, an' I'm yer slave ef yer axes it when I onc't git even. Gi'mme my gun an' turn me loose at 'em! Oh, I'm onto it all, an' I kin show 'em a wrinkle they hev'n't drimpt ov. They think they hev it hid too good, but I kin lead yer right ter whar ther gal is, an' when ther gang gits back we got 'em all."

"That's big patter, right frum ther rattles," responded Mike, doubtful exactly what was the best thing for him to do.

"But mebbe I ain't ez much bamboozled ez yer thinks. I'll cut yer loose soon ez I light yander lamp; but I wants yer ter understand I'll keep yer lined while ye'r a-showin' them hidin'-places. At ther fu'st crooked move, off goes ther top of yer cabeza. See?"

All this in a tone even lower than at first adopted.

Although it was a risk, yet Mike did not feel like being alone with the man in the darkness, and it seemed to him the best move he could make was to get him in the presence of Clean Grit as soon as possible.

The dim light he threw upon the scene was sufficient to show Davy's outlines; and for a pair of eyes as sharp as his he thought that was enough. Rapidly he cut the ropes, and stiffly did Davy rise from the bunk, lurching heavily toward the boy, like one whose limbs were almost too cramped to carry him.

"Stow that!" exclaimed Mike, too sharply, perhaps, for prudence. "Keep your distance or down you go, an' mistakes counted afterwards."

Davy gathered himself up with a muttered oath.

"Don't waste time with yer f-foolishness. They may come a-bu'stin' in any moment, an' we want ther girl outen harm's way afore we begins ter shoot. Foller me!"

Mike followed closely indeed, expecting when the door opened to see Clean Grit, waiting to join forces.

But, no Clean Grit was there! He had noiselessly vanished, to the perplexity of his pard.

"Just ez well, though," thought Mike, with ready cheerfulness. "If ther old loon goes back on me it is as well to have some one in the bushes to help me over the rifle. Wouldn't wonder if we'd strike him when we find ther girl. He's them kind, to be up to the fore when ther calico are around."

Straight for the spot where Mike thought the trap door was located staggered the man of many drinks, and for a guide he was certainly a success. He led the way through the trap, and into a narrow, tunnel-like passage.

"Thar she be—leastwise ef she ain't dead. Ther's a lock on, but I reckon it won't take long ter beat it open."

He raised a hammer which, until that moment, Mike had not observed in his hand, and made a motion as though to break the lock.

"Wait a minnit," commanded the boy, hastily.

"It's a pity ter spoil it, an' that same lock may come handy later on. Let me at it with the picks."

His enthusiasm overcame his prudence, and he advanced with an eager air. The lock would offer no great resistance if attacked from this side.

And, as he fumbled over it, the hammer came down, and Move-along Mike measured his length on the floor.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE DARKNESS OF THE DUNGEON.

WHEN Hark Hazen, approaching the cabin of Ezra Ford, heard a cry from the lips of a woman, he recognized the voice of Helen, and did not hesitate for an instant, though he was so illy fit for what he must have known would follow.

He was unarmed, save for the cudgel he had picked up, and was weak and spent from the rough treatment, the fasting, and the tramp. Of the desperadoes he was likely to meet he had already had a sample.

Nevertheless, he staggered forward with the confidence of a chief, shouting something as he came—what, he scarcely knew.

Chance befriended him, or he would have been too late to take any part in the affair. He heard the cry again, but this time it was weak and muffled, so that it was more than a surprise when he suddenly came face to face with three men, who were hurrying away from the neighborhood of the cabin.

Among them they carried a bundle. Helen Ford with a shawl wrapped around her head was being rapidly borne away.

At the sight Hark Hazen gripped his cudgel tightly, and swung its end out fiercely at the nearest man.

Excitement added to his strength, but the blow was nothing like the one he had planned. It hit the fellow squarely on the head, but he only reeled back with a curse which came involuntarily from his lips.

Before Hazen could strike again one of the other men had dropped his hold on the girl and leaped in to a close, his strong fingers clutching by the throat so that not a sound escaped the lips of the young man.

After that there could be no doubt as to the result. In a moment his arms were bound as securely as could be imagined and a gag thrust in his mouth.

There seemed to be some doubt in the minds of the men as to what should be done with him, after he was secured. Great as was their haste they put their heads together.

"Let him lay there and rot, if no one strikes him before that time," suggested one of the men, who perhaps was not quite as bloodthirsty as the others.

"That would be good enough if we were just sure he would do it; but he knows too much. Who is he anyhow?" and the ruffian bent over and peered down into the face of the half insensible young man.

"Friend ov hern, I reckon," suggested the third man.

"Heard him callin' her name, leastwise; but looks like a tenderfoot peelgrim, an' a stranger ter Pay Dirt."

"Bring him along!" said a fourth voice, in a low, stern whisper. "If he is the wrong man a knife-thrust will correct the mistake. If he turns out to be the right one I'm not sure we won't save him for something worse. Blindfold him, though, so he won't see where he is going."

"Ez you say, boss," answered the third speaker, swiftly obeying the order as to shutting out the light from the eyes which were already beginning to stare around after a fashion which told that what they saw would not be forgotten.

Hazen started at the sound of the voice of the man who was called boss, though it was one he had never before heard, and the look shot his way was one keen and vengeful; but the man was gone almost as soon as he spoke, and all that Hazen had was a glimpse of a cloaked figure, vanishing behind the shrubbery.

"Bring him along—yaas," muttered the man who had applied the handkerchief to Hazen's eyes; "thet's all right, ov course, but how are it to be done? Blamed ef it ain't a contrack I wisht he'd let ter some other mother's son. Hyer, Mister Man! You wantter sabbe mighty sudden! This hyer are my gun what are borin' inter yer ear. Jest get up an walk, er I pull on ther trigger. An' ef I do, off goes ther hull top ov yer head."

Hazen made a feeble movement of his head. If they had only known it, he was but too willing to move off with the procession, so long as it took him in the wake of Helen.

Why she remained so motionless he could not imagine, unless some drug had been employed, or she had fainted from fright.

"You'll go, eh? All right! Prance up, then, and move right along. It'll be a mighty bad thing fur you ef we meet anybody on ther road, but we got ter take chances."

It was tedious work, and attended with some danger, this stumbling forward, guided by the unfriendly clutch on his arm, but Harker Hazen never faltered or gave signs of hanging back unless it was through sheer physical weakness. He knew not where he was going, and when the end of the journey was reached, could hardly hazard a guess, for a time at least, as to where he was.

With the cords still on his wrists, and the gag on his mouth, he sunk down on the floor of what seemed to be some sort of a prison cell, and by and by slept the sleep of utter exhaustion.

When he awoke the cords were gone, a feeble light was burning in one corner of his prison, and on the ground beside him was a chunk of bread and a pail of water. Some one had been near him while he slept.

Ordinarily it would have been a meal from which he would have turned with disgust, but nothing ever tasted sweeter to him than did that bread, and he ate ravenously of it.

As he well knew he had not even a pocket knife left to him, he did not waste time examining his pockets. The walls of his cell were of immense stones, if they were not, in fact, part of a solid ledge. The door was of oak plank, solid as the day they were sawed out of the tree. Without tools of any kind, it seemed simply madness to think of escape.

Time wore on.

The chunk of bread which had been too large for one meal was scarcely enough for two. He did not know whether he had been in the cell one day, two days, or a dozen. The light went out at length, and he was alone in the terrible darkness.

It was actually a pleasure for him to hear some one fumbling at the fastenings on the other side of the door.

"Hyer's yer grub!" growled a voice as the door opened.

Then, something was placed on the floor, and he heard the bolt being slot back to place.

Was it, though? It seemed to the prisoner that it did not sound as though it had gone properly into its socket.

He waited anxiously, with every nerve quivering. A rash movement might destroy all hope.

When perfectly satisfied that his jailer had gone for good, he tried the door cautiously. It yielded to his touch.

He was about to push it open when he heard the sound of a light footstep—at which he shrunk back and waited for silence.

"I must get out of this at once, and at whatever risk," he decided. "If that fellow returns and finds how he left the way open he will be doubly cautious in the future. Wherever the route takes me it can hardly be to a worse place than this—and, it may lead to Helen."

This time he not only pushed the door open but stole softly out into what seemed to be a low corridor, where he stood listening for a moment, and then crept aimlessly forward for a little way.

Again he heard the sound of footsteps, and this time there could be no mistake. Two persons were coming, and one of them carried a light. He crouched down without the least hope of remaining unseen, and waited for what he believed would be the struggle of his life.

He was more fortunate than he had dreamed of being. He saw Drunken Davy and Move-along Mike come along together, saw them stop in front of a second door, and then saw Mike go down under a fierce blow from a hammer.

There was murder in the eyes of Davy as he raised the hammer for another stroke.

It had seemed to him, even in the hasty glance he had of the youth's features, that he recognized them, though he did not at once call to mind the meeting by the side of the trail. He could not stand by to see murder done, and dared not cry out lest he might only peril his own life; so he glided noiselessly toward the two, and was almost ready to spring when the hammer was raised for the second time.

The hammer did not descend, for there was heard the sound of heavy, though cautious feet. Drunken Davy stooped and looked at his victim. Then, apparently satisfied his work had been already done, he turned away, dropping the hammer on the floor by the side of the motionless body.

Hazen looked around.

There was no way for him to escape if these coming men intended to pass along the tunnel by the same route as that taken by the one whose footsteps he had previously heard. He was not equal to a conflict with one man now, let alone half a dozen, and probably the boy was already dead.

He stole forward, caught up the hammer, and then ran lightly back to the cell he had left, closing the door carefully behind him.

He was just in time, too. Through the crack around the door he could hear the heavy tread, and muffled voices as they passed his hiding-place.

He hardly waited a moment.

At all risks he must escape now; so he pushed open the door, and felt his way along the

now darkened passage until he stumbled over the body of the boy.

Move-along Mike was not as hard hurt as he had seemed. He was trying to struggle to a sitting posture, and as he did so was mumbling.

"All right, me covey! but, whar's Helen? Did yer say she war in thar?"

That was enough for Hazen. He knew where the door was, and had seen the lock. A touch or two of the hand, a blow or two of the hammer, and the way was open.

"Helen!" he softly called, as he leaned forward into the double darkness of the room beyond.

"Helen Ford! Are you there? It is I—Harker Hazen!"

A little cry of delight, a rustle of a woman's dress, and Helen came gliding to him.

"Ah, at last! at last!" she murmured.

At that cry his arms went round her, and for a blissful second they were clasped in a fond embrace.

"Now, not a word till we are in safety!" he whispered.

"And there is another victim here I must help, as he had tried to help you. Hold fast to me. I'll have to carry him, but I think I can find the way."

He stooped, and taking a firm grip on the collar of Move-along Mike, turned his face in what he knew was the direction of the stairway.

They hurried along as best they might, hardly knowing what to expect, but all the time conscious there was deadly danger behind them.

Then, just as Hazen had dragged Mike up through the open trap, and was turning away, believing the victory won, there was a hideous roar, and a blast which seemed to rack and wrench the cabin from its foundations.

Then, from the earth below, there was a crash and a low, cavernous rumble.

After that, all was still.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE GRAND EXPLOSION.

CLEAN GRIT heard part of the conversation that followed Mike's discovery of Davy, but he did not wait for the interview to close. The mention of the girl decided him to be up and doing. He turned away and sought the trap.

Once in the passage he passed rapidly forward.

In the darkness he did not see the door, but if he had done so he would not have hesitated. He thought he understood the meaning of the tunnel, and was anxious to be at the other end.

As has been stated, this cabin of Drunken Davy was not far distant from the storehouse.

Expecting the journey would seem long, the end came before he looked for it, and hardly to his surprise he touched planking above his head. At the same time a little pencil of light streamed down from above.

With the butt of his revolver the lad rapped sharply on the planking, and, placing his mouth as near as he could to the orifice through which the light was passing, he called:

"Aho, there! Sailor Sam, aho!"

There was a sound as if a chair had suddenly fallen, and two feet thumped down upon the floor.

"Sta'board yer helm, thar, h-a-rd a sta'board! Sheer off till I see your colors!"

"You can't see them, Sam, unless you've got a pair of magnifying spectacles, that can look through a two-inch oak plank. It's Clean Grit, an' he's on the trail of the Killers again. If you'll say I can come in I'll explain the racket."

"But, whar are ye? Blessed ef I see how yer means ter come in onless it's through that bloody little hawse-hole, an' you jest couldn't git thar."

"Yes, but I can, though. I'll open the way. There's not much time to go on. If I hadn't turned up you would have gone to Kingdom Come before many minutes."

Clean Grit had used the matches in his pocket and had made a discovery.

Sailor Sam heard the grinding sound of bolts pushed back, saw a section of a plank drop downward, revealing to his surprise an unthought-of trap-door. Then, the boy hustler scrambled through, his hands well up over his head as he rose from the floor. There could be no doubt that he came with honest intentions.

"Hello! How does it come you are alone?" asked Clean Grit, as he looked sharply around.

"Went out ter look fur the'r wives an' sweethearts, an' didn't come back. Ef they war ter come I dunno thet I'd let them in."

"Never mind that, now; it is too late. I hear the Killers. They would attack you from the tunnel—blowing the trap open if need be, to take you by surprise. They have the fireworks in there, all loaded and primed and hyer they come to touch 'em off an' blow you to Kindom Come! Turn down that light and leave the trap open for a bit. There, that will do! I want it just so I can see my fuse, fer I'm going to give 'em a dose of their own medicine."

The daring boy leaned through the trap and listened, while the other watched him with puzzled eagerness.

Suddenly there was a little flare of light in the darkness below, and Clean Grit sprang to his feet. "All right! The fuse is off!" and the oaken trap closed with a bang.

"Back, for your life!" he now shouted. "I've moved their mine a little, and fired their own blast!"

He had hardly uttered the word when there was a roar, and a concussion which shook the place, filling the room with smoke and dust, and throwing the two headlong to the storehouse floor.

The boy hustler had hardly been able to guess at the real strength of the blast, and would not have been willing to swear it would stop the rush of the men of Captain Kill. Certainly it would not wreck the storehouse for that would defeat their own object, in firing it off.

The result was better than Clean Grit had hoped. When he and Sailor Sam rose to their feet and listened a little, hearing nothing, they examined.

The trap door was in splinters, but the tunnel had disappeared. The roof had dropped in, and if Captain Kill and his men were moving to the attack when the shock came, they were no doubt buried beneath tons of dirt.

When help came, as it soon did, and the matter was explained, there was a rush for the cabin of Drunken Davy.

Clean Grit was anxious to see what had become of his pard, and if there was any truth in the statement of Davy that Helen Ford was somewhere about the shanty.

The cabin was there; Move-along Mike was there; a young man and a young woman were there; the trap-door and the beginning of the tunnel were there, but no sign of Captain Kill and his men!

A few yards from the trap the roofing of the underground passage had caved in as completely as it had done at the storehouse. From one end to the other, the tunnel was obliterated, and the ground seemed to be an unpierced mass.

The dauntless Michael had a bloody face, and a very sore head, but otherwise did not seem the worse for the rustle that now, apparently, was ended.

"Did any of them get away?" demanded Clean Grit, rushing at him.

"Can't prove it by me; but ef they war in that underground run I should jedge they didn't. I got a clip on the head, early in the game, that laid me out cold ez a wedge."

"I come to jest afore thar war a roar frum ther bowils ov ther yearth an' ev'rything went tergether, an' you bet, thar's nobody gone by, sence."

"That's the last, then, of Captain Kill an' his gang," decided Clean Grit, with an air of conviction, and satisfaction, too.

"Ter say nothing of Drunken Davy and ther doctor. Mebbe, though, it might be jest ez well ter say nothin' ov them two, an' allow Pay Dirt ter find it out fur theselves. I'll bet thar's a case ov myster'us dis-serpearans in ther mornin' pape's. I on'y got enter it at ther last minnit; but them two kids are jest one an' ther same."

"A lightning change artist he was, then. But for one night I think we have done enough for two average boys. Let's see Miss Helen and that young daisy she has in tow. And when we put her in the arms of her dad we can afford to go hunt a bunk. This thing has been going on long enough to make me tired."

The work of the boy hustler and his pard at Pay Dirt appeared to be accomplished.

It was not hard to understand how the boys had saved the treasure at the storehouse, but it was a day or so before Ezra Ford was able to explain to them the thing they appeared entitled to know.

"I have been sacrificing myself for years for the sake of one who, in life, was dear to me—a brother. He is dead now, and though I would fain respect his memory there is no other reason why Helen and myself should not go back and enjoy the wealth which would have been mine years ago had I never left the East."

"Not knowing the truth as it was, the doctor had been holding over my head the sins of another, and when he found at last that his whip had become worthless he attempted to slay."

"How he was balked let Hazen tell. I cannot spend the strength, just now. When he did not return to me, and I had gained some little strength—perhaps it was only the fever coming back again—I had no fear for the men whom I knew were watching for me, and I reached my home. The rest you know, as well at least as I."

"Hanshaw carried my daughter, and with her Hazen, to the one place he was sure would never be searched, and from which Helen might be most easily taken at the same time with the treasures of the storehouse which he was scheming to seize and make off with."

"Had he succeeded in dragging her away for good, he would never have won the fortune in the East through her until he had first slain me. I came back ready to fight to the last, knowing in a few short weeks I would have wealth enough at my command to crush him, even if it took an army."

"The treasure has not gone yet, for the men have been too busy rebuilding their shattered camp, but next week they can spare a guard which will render the journey safe, and in the coach will go Helen, Hark Hazen and myself. If there is anyway I can prove my more than gratitude, let me know. You two boys are indeed noble fellows."

Clean Grit shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"Thanks from Mike and myself, but life is too brief to explain. In short, to do what we set out to do has been oceans of fun. If you ever need us again let us know and we'll be on hand, but for the present I guess we'd better say, good-morning! So-long! We'll see you later."

In due course of time, the coach and its mounted guard left Pay Dirt, and the treasure, and Ezra Ford, and Ezra Ford's daughter, and Ezra Ford's prospective son, went with it, leaving the hustler two pards to their own devices.

THE END.

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